



Bo (SS) Jungle

SHORT STORIES:

Friend

Span

Lunch

Switch

Candy

Burglary

Riley  
BROTHERS  
COLLECTION

E. DAVIES

## The Riley Brothers Collection



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*To my readers, who make every word matter. I'm blessed to have you on  
my side. Always be you!*



THE RILEY BROTHERS BOOK 1

E. DAVIES

## Prologue

A fucking jock strap.

Jesus Christ, how much hotter could Cameron get?

Noah's jaw dropped. Cameron was kneeling across his stomach, leaning back on his heels. Callused hands slid his jeans down muscled thighs and Cameron's package bulged forward. He was hard inside the stretchy fabric, and Noah needed to find out how hard.

He leaned up to press a light kiss along the inside of Cameron's thigh, bracing his elbow behind himself. There was stubble there – Cameron shaved and trimmed a little, then. He couldn't wait to find out how much.

Noah ran his hands up along the backs of Cameron's thighs to feel the bare, firm curves of his ass. God, what a great ass highlighted by the straps along the back of his underwear. He pulled Cameron down into him, making Cam's firm package rub against his thigh for a teasing preview for both of them.

Cameron grunted and pushed forward a little, his thighs twitching again. Noah knew Cam's cock had to be getting uncomfortable. He hurried to free it and pull aside the pouch of the jock strap.

“That's so fuckin' hot,” Noah whispered. The stiff warmth of the erection slid down his thigh as Cameron sidled down between his legs. “You have no idea.”

“I have a bunch of these.”

Then, Cameron's thick, warm, callused fingers were wetly pressing against Noah's opening.

Noah breathed out hard. “Oh, the world is a better place now.” He curled his toes into the bed and pushed up a little. Those fingers slid inside, through the first few seconds of discomfort and straight to pleasure.

Cameron's fingers were so fuckin' good. He wouldn't complain if Cam just wanted to get him off now by rubbing his prostate. He pictured Cam pressing broad fingertips inside, rubbing sparks of pleasure into a fire of need...

Noah was whimpering in the back of his throat and he didn't even care. He pushed his hips into the air, arched his back, even gasped for breath despite his attempts to stay calm and composed...

*Fuck, no. Don't come yet.* He wanted Cam's cock.

He slapped Cameron's wrist and shook his head at the hunk above him. "Don't waste any more time."

He needed Cameron inside, now, fucking him into the mattress until he lost control.

More than that: he needed the intimacy of Cameron's lips on his, Cameron's body blanketing his, Cameron's eyes on his.

As Cameron's thick cock pressed into him, Noah's mind spun with dizzying pleasure. He never wanted this moment – the first gasp together as bodies locked and muscles tensed – to end. Unless he could trade for the smooth, skillful thrusts of body against and into body.

*Cameron... is all I want.*

The realization was quiet, unlike the earth-shattering revelation that he liked men. It was a thrumming hum of love building under his skin, his heart pumping with warmth and passion and pure affection.

Wait. Not love. It was too soon to fall so completely for Cameron.

Yet something in Noah's heart told him this was a relationship he was willing to work hard to start and work harder to never end.

Noah clenched around Cameron for a moment. He moaned into Cameron's mouth and Cameron's lips brushed his, soothing and encouraging him.

"Cam...!"

## Cameron

Ice squeaked as his blades cut clean lines down the center of the ice. Foot over foot, a swerve, a sudden swoop around the net, and back down to the other end. It didn't matter if he was sick, injured, or heartbroken: the cool breeze across his face grounded him. He spun to skate backward down the ice a few dozen feet, then turned again to swoop around the corner again behind the net.

It was second nature at this point for Cameron Riley. He'd been skating since he was three. Four years later, he was playing hockey. Then, he became the star forward of the junior team. Back then, the other kids hadn't been competition for him.

Now...

"Heads!"

The weight of one of his teammates slammed into him from the side. They crashed into the boards, pulling their feet up and out of the way of each other.

"This isn't the fuckin' bunny league, Cam! Keep your head up!"

Coach Walker was right.

This was the minor leagues, but there was nothing minor about the upcoming big games. The series was tied. It was going to game seven. Just as important: the scouts in the crowd would take note of who was responsible for their win or loss.

The *big* job offers were coming in the next couple of months. Everyone on the team who was serious about their pro career had their head up and eye on the puck. They couldn't pass up the salary, the fame, and the chance to do what every one of them had been training for over the last five, ten, even twenty years.

"Sorry, coach," Cameron recited, focusing on the puck as he swept around to join the drill. It flashed back and forth between Matty and Lou's sticks.

"Get to it, then. All of you. I want a good, clean game. Not too boring, not too flashy. Play to win, both sides."

They split into practice teams. Another wave of dizziness swamped Cameron as he thought about what they were practicing for.

It was a big deal. Tied series weren't won on game three, but the tone was set for the fourth, fifth, even sixth games.

Their opponents – fucking Montreal, to add insult to injury – were good at nailing them on their weaknesses. Their goalie played aggressively on the crease, and their defense players moved lightning-fast. Cameron liked to figure out the *best* pass, not just the most available one, but their defense were aggressive. They wouldn't let him get away with anything.

He was getting dizzy a lot lately when he thought about it, but that was a common reaction to stress. He pushed through on the ice every time. He'd mentioned it to the team doc after the last game and they'd figured he'd been sneaking in too many extra-salted chips. He liked to rationalize it away by saying the fat gave him extra bulk.

Nathan hated it, but Nathan hated a lot of stuff he did. He was in the bleachers, scrolling through his phone and glancing up now and then. Like some of the hockey wives, he dropped in to watch now and then. He expected extra praise and sex for doing it.

When the puck dropped, Cam easily won the scramble and took off down the ice with it. *Pace yourself, Cam.* Fast games weren't everything. He was going to get the most ice time of any of his teammates – Coach Walker had pulled him aside yesterday to tell him that.

Coach Walker wanted him to be drafted this year.

Lou deked left, then right, then whipped the tip of his stick around Cam's. He lightly nudged the puck around the edge of his blade and took off the other way.

Much as it made his blood boil, Cam admired the move. Lou was the master of subtle grace on ice, underplaying what he was about to do until he took off at a sprint. He was light, fast, and would be infuriating for Montreal to deal with tomorrow.

Cam pursued, but it was too late: the puck flashed across the ice toward Mac as Chris tried to intercept it. The bleachers were gone, his focus narrowing to the ice. His heart pounded. His breath was ragged. *Control yourself. Don't burn out in the first five minutes, rookie.*

He didn't succeed, but after a quick skirmish, Mac had it – for a few seconds.

Mac passed to Chris, who broke out of the pack with the puck and sprinted down the ice. Cam spun on his heel for a two-pronged maneuver. Sure enough, Chris passed the puck to him and they rushed past Lou and McKay.

This was their game-winning move.

Cameron's heart pounded. He slipped Chris the puck, then crossed in a quick dance of blades. He fainted like he had the puck, drawing McKay's eye for long enough to get Chris into position, and *oh shit*, he was *very* dizzy, and his heart was racing and he couldn't breathe, the pounding in his ears drowning out the screeches of metal on ice, and then--

--the ice rose, jumping up at him, flying into his face.

Blackness.

---

Loud voices. Screeching, a spray of ice across his cheek. His heart fluttering helplessly, beating one-two-three-four-five before he finished each thought...

Somehow, in that split-second that had passed since he'd fallen, there was a stretcher under him. He was being carried, and--

"Wha--?"

"Lie down," Coach Walker told him. He was strapped down anyway, and – fuck, that hadn't been five seconds, had it?

He was dizzy and sick and there were voices again. Mac was asking someone if he'd be okay, if this was just a spell or "something more serious" in a carefully calm tone.

An authoritative voice from near his ear told Mac they were doing everything they could.

"What about the game tomorrow?" That was Nathan.

"We don't know yet. The doctors will make that call."

Cam struggled to open his eyes and see his boyfriend, but it was bright. And warm. They were outside the arena now. His practice shirt clung to him with sweat at the warm spring air compared to the refreshing cold of the arena. He nearly protested about having to go into the warmth, but he kept his mouth shut.



Fuck, his lip throbbed and his head... He wasn't wearing a helmet, but he had been, hadn't he?

“You're with us again, aren't you, Cam? You mind being called that?”

Cameron blinked, focusing on a friendly face as his stretcher was lifted into the ambulance. A man a couple years older than him, with light brown hair. He was smiling, and Cam's lips instinctively twitched. The man had a calming air about him.

“Yeah, s'fine,” Cameron mumbled, clearing his throat. “What-- what happened?”

“You fainted on the ice,” the EMT answered, swinging himself up beside Cameron into the seat. That was right, he was an EMT. He had a uniform. Cam appreciated uniformed men, especially those who helped people. Including himself right now.

That reminded him – Nathan. He spotted his dark-haired boyfriend standing outside the ambulance.

“Are you coming with us?” Another EMT was talking to Nathan this time.

Nathan hesitated.

In those few seconds, the sinking truth hit Cameron: he wasn't planning on staying with him. The last time they'd gone on again, they'd agreed to keep it quiet. To the outside world, even to his own team, as always, they'd be good buddies. The team knew the truth, but nobody said it.

*Fuck.*

What had he done wrong this time?

“Otherwise, I'm coming,” Coach Walker spoke up, and there was something in his voice – a threat? A reprimand?

Nathan's deep, thrumming voice sounded. “I guess I am.”

“Sit up front with me, then,” an EMT directed.

Nathan caught Cameron's eyes for a long moment, those dark eyes penetrating yet veiled. The ambulance doors slammed shut.

*I guess so?*

Cameron gulped for air.

This time, when dizzying blackness struck, Cameron welcomed it, if

just for a moment.

Cameron

*Beep, beep, beep.*

So it was true that when you woke up in the hospital, you were attached to a heart monitor.

It was far from the first time Cam had used one. As he fidgeted with the cushioned plastic clip around his finger, the gaps between spikes on the screen narrowed.

What the *hell* was wrong with him?

"You're awake," a nurse smiled, stepping around the curtain. He guessed he was in an emergency room.

"Yes. I... how long was I out?"

"You've only been here for a few minutes," she assured him. "How do you feel?"

"Frozen crap," he answered, then winced. "Pardon me." *Can't say what I'd say on ice.*

"Your heart rate is back to normal," she told him, not fazed. "The doctors will want to do tests on you, of course."

"Right."

"Let me know if you need anything – the doctor will be by shortly."

Cameron murmured, "I'm fine," then glanced around. Nobody was there with him. "Uh, did anyone come with me?"

The nurse shook her head. "There was someone here for a few minutes, but he seems to have left."

*Of course he did.* Cameron lay back, gazing at the green curtains. "All right." His voice was soft. He didn't want to sound defeated, but it was hard to feel any other way.

*Nathan can do whatever he wants. Maybe he has something urgent to get to...*

He wasn't sure how much time passed, but he wasn't passing out

again. Instead, he focused on staying calm, picturing the plays they'd gone over that morning.

Damn. He'd never gotten a chance to test their new deep right wing penetration and hook. That would have been a fun move. Hopefully he'd be able to pull it off tomorrow. He'd skate tonight if he had to.

"Cam?"

It was Coach Walker's voice.

"Here, coach." Cameron nodded as the familiar gray-haired man pushed his way around the curtain, carrying his gym bag. Thank god he'd washed it after spilling Gatorade all over it.

"How you doing, buddy?" his coach asked, his tone gruff but a little warmer than usual. "I brought your stuff and called your brother."

*Fuck. He's feeling sorry for me.*

Oddly enough, even being in the hospital wasn't serious to Cameron. He'd been there enough for stitches, concussion checks, a broken arm...

But having this man sound even slightly concerned?

That was fucking terrifying.

"Fine, fine," Cameron assured him. "Thanks. I passed out in the ambulance, but I've been awake since then."

"You never told me or the doc anything was wrong," the coach said, and that was definitely a reprimand.

Cameron blushed and shrugged. "Sorry, coach. That was a big fuck-up, I know. I just... didn't think it was this bad. Doc thought it was too much salt. I've never just... passed out."

"You wiped out pretty bad. That'll be a colorful lip," Coach Walker added. "And you're definitely not fit to play the next game."

Cam's heart sank.

Of all the punishments Coach Walker gave out, benching was among the worst. Benching him for one of the biggest playoff games against their bitter rival?

His heart monitor sped up in the background. He gritted his teeth for a moment before letting his breath out.

"Fine," he answered with a slight nod.

Coach Walker eyed him for a moment, then sank into his chair. "You misunderstand. This isn't to punish you, kid. You're twenty-three – you're on the cusp of success. You can't fuck it up now. Push too hard, at the wrong time, and you can bench yourself for *life*. Or, worse, lose your life. Heart problems, if that's what this is, are nothing to screw around with."

Cameron wanted to argue, wanted to jump out of the hospital bed. He wanted to do ten one-armed pushups just to prove how in-shape he was. He had to prove that he wouldn't faint again, but... he didn't know if he would.

Maybe his coach was right.

"This one game, then. Hopefully the doctor will be here soon..."

The curtain swung. A man in the stereotype of a doctor's image – older, white coat, aloof – stepped through.

"Ah, my star hockey player," he greeted. "And you must be his coach."

"Walker."

They firmly shook hands.

"Dr. Lenny. And you're Cameron?"

"Yeah," Cameron confirmed, fidgeting with the finger clip again.

Dr. Lenny pulled Cameron's paperwork out of the file for a quick glance. "There's nothing out of the ordinary on your records. Anything you want to tell me?"

"No, sir," Cameron answered. "Except I've been getting dizzy whenever I get stressed for the past... well, for a while. I went to the team doctor and she told me it's probably salt. I *was* eating too much."

"No other dietary changes?"

"No."

"What about drugs? Legal or illegal."

Coach Walker looked sharply at him.

Cameron's cheeks flushed at the implications. "No," he snapped. "I don't do anything except multivitamins. I can't afford to fail those tests."

"All right," the doctor nodded, making notes. "We'll need to keep you

for today for testing if you want us to get to the bottom of this. I'll order the battery of tests." He stepped out around the curtain again.

"You can't be passing out on ice again," Coach Walker said, rising to his feet. "Take the time to get better. Even if you miss the rest of the playoffs, we don't want you sending the net flying again."

"Shit, did I?"

"You hit the boards and then crashed into the net."

Cameron raised his free hand to press his fingers to his lip. Not the worst he'd ever had, but he felt like he'd been thrown through the boards. Then, he touched his chest – there were cardiac monitor pads already stuck to his skin, and he winced. Those were going to be a bitch to get off.

"Yeah, you're still pretty, don't worry," the coach snorted.

That made Cameron laugh, at least.

"Where's your – uh, where's that kid, Nathan?"

"I'm... not sure," he admitted.

Coach Walker knew the truth. Cam had walked into the coach's office on his first day on the team, scared and shaking and sure he was about to lose his chance at pro sports. The coach had coolly told him he wasn't the first and he wouldn't be the last. Then, he'd said to keep his head down unless he was ready to be the poster boy.

When Nathan had shown up to practices along with the other guys' girlfriends or wives, Coach Walker had put two and two together. He'd just told Cam not to let him distract him.

Nathan did nothing *but* distract him.

He was always trying to prove himself to Nathan – that he wouldn't sleep with the rest of the team, let fame get to his head, forget about him... Nathan complained he had his head in the clouds; he tried to stay grounded by cooking every meal when he was home. Nathan said he didn't pay him enough attention; he'd learned sensual techniques to mix up his sports-focused massages.

And now, for the third time, Nathan had walked out on him.

Coach Walker smiled dryly. "Not the best time to decide he has other priorities, kid. Watch out for yourself."

"I will."

The coach stood up and clapped his arm. "I'll check in on you later. I gotta get back to practice."

The arena felt a million miles away from him.

"Could you, uh, grab my phone first? I wanna make sure my brother knows I'm alive." Jackson would be out of his mind by now, and Cameron didn't want the whole family panicking. "It's in the end pouch."

The coach fished it out and handed it over without looking at it, then clapped his arm again. "See you, kid. Get better."

"Will do, sir."

Holding the phone was awkward without one finger, but he managed it one-handed.

Both his brothers and Nathan had messaged him.

Jackson's message was first: *Hey, I heard what happened. Call when you can. Haven't told Mom & Dad yet. On my way, should be there tonight.*

Cameron hadn't seen Jackson since Christmas. Even if the reason wasn't the best for the visit, his big brother would look out for him in the hospital system.

Thomas's message was next: *Thinking of you, lots of love.* Simple and sweet, just like Thomas. He worked as a bank teller, which suited his reserved personality. Cam secretly wondered if he would turn out to be the third gay brother in the family. Cam was only halfway out, but everyone had guessed; Jackson had been out since high school. Thomas just... didn't talk about dating. Not before or since moving out to Halifax, the big city.

Finally, though his stomach twisted with dread, he opened Nathan's message. His heart sank, but he forced himself to keep reading through the end.

*I'm done. Don't want to indulge you in drama. I've blocked and deleted your phone number and email and I'm moving out soon. I can't put up with your attention seeking anymore. Have a good life.*

Cameron choked back a sob that threatened to escape his lips and closed his eyes, pulling the thin hospital blanket up over him a little more.

He'd always expected it, but somehow, hadn't prepared for it. Now that the moment was here, he couldn't process the mix of anger, grief, and fear.

*Why fear?*

His coach shouted that at Cam when he held back from a good move. The answer was all too clear.

*I'm not good enough even for a guy like him.*

---

Cameron was exhausted and cranky by the time the doctor walked into his tiny section of the emergency room. He was about sick of nurses giving him tests, asking about his condition, checking his heart monitor... They were nice, but they couldn't give him a prognosis.

This new specialist, a short man with close-cropped hair and a brisk attitude, first checked his file. "Cameron Riley?" His tone was authoritative.

Cameron fought the instinct to sit up straight. "Yes, sir."

"I've been going over your test results and all your physical records from your team doctor. Neither of us can find anything wrong with you."

Cameron's cheeks burned as his jaw dropped. *Is he implying I made this up...?*

"You obviously experienced some anomaly, but we can't identify it."

"No..." Cameron murmured. "No, you don't understand. I can't play until this is diagnosed."

"Ah. That's the thing."

No.

Cameron raised his hand and eased himself into a sitting position to hear this. He couldn't think how to explain the desperate desire that pulsed, throbbed, hummed through him. He *needed* to skate more than breathing. Fuck, that was a cliché. He just needed to tell them to fix him.

There were a few moments of silence before the doctor spoke up, his voice quiet. "We'll keep you here for a few days and try to get a diagnosis for you, but you won't be out in time for your next game. I already told your coach."

Cameron shook his head. There wasn't a lot else he could say. He didn't want to hear the doctor telling him he was useless.



“So, you don't know what this thing could do to me, when it'll happen again...?”

“Physical exertion is the only clue we have tying together the dizzy spells you reported before and this incident,” the doctor answered. “That's why we're keeping you here in a controlled environment. We'll contact your insurance regarding a private room... I'll send the nurse in to explain everything.”

Cameron had to bite back all the venom in his veins to manage a quick, “Thanks.”

What had he done to deserve this shit?

Abso-fucking-lutely nothing.

## Jackson

Tongs weighed down one of Jackson's hands, the blowtorch heavy in the other. He stretched the steel rod, shaping the rough draft with precise hands.

Of all things to be working on, an art piece about a hockey player was an oddity, but Jackson was enjoying it. It made a great change from all the construction jobs.

His cellphone rang and he frowned. He had "do not disturb" on for all but emergency calls.

Oh, shit.

He backed away from the glowing steel, then fumbled under his leather apron and yanked off his gloves to grab his cellphone.

*Coach Walker.*

Who was that?

It took him a second to remember: his little brother's coach who'd led his team to a near-perfect season record last year. So far this year, it was a less perfect but grittier record – whatever that meant. Cam had given Jackson the coach's number to reach him on short notice during a game, but Jackson hadn't expected the other way around.

"Oh, *shit*," he whispered, out loud this time. He fumbled to slide a finger across the screen. "Jackson speaking."

"Jackson Riley, right?"

"Yep, that's me. You're Coach Walker? My little brother's coach?"

"Yes. Don't worry, your brother's fine."

Nothing in the world would make him fucking panic more. "What happened?" he demanded.

"He fainted during practice. There's some kind of... medical issue going on with him. It's not dangerous so far as we can tell. But it's serious enough to bench him until we get a diagnosis."

“Is he in the hospital now?”

Jackson yanked his leather apron off, shutting off the forge damper to stifle the fire. He groped for his keys with his other hand.

Toronto was a damn sight away from his small New Brunswick hometown, but he was gonna drive there if he had to.

“Yes,” the coach told him. “The doctor's told him that he's benched.”

“Jesus, I bet he didn't take that well.” Jackson double- and triple-checked the forge, then transferred his phone to the other ear to open the door to his workshop and step outside.

It was still early enough in the year to need a jacket, but only a light one. The temperature was always in the plus during the day.

“I haven't talked to him yet. He'll launch himself out of bed to explain why he can play after all.” Jackson laughed. *That* sounded like his kid brother.

Cam had always hid any perceived weakness. Once, he'd knocked out a tooth on the fence while climbing trees. He'd come into the house cool as a cucumber, hand hiding his bloody mouth, and told their mother he needed to see the dentist.

“How long has this been going on?”

“We don't know. He talked to the team doctor a couple times about dizzy spells and we thought it was a nutrition problem. Then, suddenly... Well, this is the first time fainting we know about, and I trust him to have told someone if it had happened before.”

Jackson wasn't so sure, but either way, he was going to find out what Cameron had been hiding. He just worried it had something to do with that dick boyfriend... Nathan whatshisface. He'd never liked the guy, but for some reason, Cam was stuck on him. Not that Jackson's taste in men was much better, but he pushed that thought aside.

He unlocked the car door. “Right. Thanks. I'm gonna fly in, I think. I'll break the news to our brother and parents.”

“Thanks,” Coach Walker answered. “Appreciate it, man. I'm sure we'll see each other when you visit him.”

“Yep. Just text me the details of his hospital and stuff so I can get in when I get there,” Jackson requested.

“Of course. I'll make sure they expect you. Want me to let him know?”

“Nah, I'll surprise him,” Jackson told him. “Thanks, Coach.”

When they hung up, Jackson leaned against his car door while he searched for flights to Toronto.

---

The hospital was sterile and cold, and Jackson hated it. Getting his wisdom teeth out had been enough experience with hospitals for him. They were ugly and white and architecturally displeasing. Not that he was an architect, but he worked with enough design stuff that he thought he had a better eye than most.

Give him some steel columns and twisted chandeliers and blown glass windows any day.

He was built like his brother, broad shoulders and firm jaw and around six feet tall, but Cameron was more nimble and lithe, an athletic build. Jackson was muscle and had always been goalie in their boyhood ball hockey games. He'd been all right. Cameron had kicked everyone's ass until he talked their parents into letting him do hockey when he was seven. The rest... well, was about to be history.

God, he hoped his brother didn't have to quit. From what he understood, his agent was certain he'd get signed this season. Cam wasn't going to take it well if he had to quit now.

He knocked on the door to Cameron's room, then cracked it open and stepped inside.

His little brother was at least dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, but he was lying down on a hospital bed surrounded by machinery. He was pale and stressed as hell. In this environment, Cam looked younger than his twenty-two years – no, twenty-three now. Like the last four years, Cam's birthday had been spent in constant training.

“Hey, bro.” Cameron glanced up quickly. The mix of expressions on Cameron's face made Jackson smile: confusion, then surprise and joy. It had been a couple months since they'd last seen each other just before Christmas.

Jackson strode across the room as Cameron sat up in bed, leaning in to hug him. Jackson refrained from his usual strong back-clap, but Cameron hugged him as tight as ever.

“Hey, Jackson,” Cameron answered, his voice quieter. He was alone in the room, a fact that made Jackson frown.

“Where's everyone? The coach? That boyfriend of yours, Nathan?”

Cameron's expression shifted strangely and he looked away.

*Oh. Shit.* Jackson hadn't meant to pry at a recent wound. “...No.”

“Yeah, he, uh. He's gone.” The words were sour and succinct on Cameron's tongue. From his tone, Jackson knew the bastard had dumped him.

“Fuck.” Jackson sank down into the chair next to the bed. He scooted it closer and leaned in to half-hug his brother again, clapping his back this time. “Sorry, man. Just now?”

“Yeah, earlier today.”

Jackson's head spun. The last few hours in airport hell and on planes had thrown him for a loop. It hardly seemed like the same day Cam had been admitted. It was late now, past visiting hours, but he'd talked his way in. “I wish I could've been here in person sooner. The bastard was no good for you.”

A little smile cracked through Cam's stress and grief. “Tell me what you really think.”

“I always do,” Jackson reminded him, grinning back at him. “I'll stay here with you 'til you're out, all right?”

Cameron's eyes widened. “You can do that? Work-wise? Oh, shit, do Mom and Dad know?”

“Yeah, and Thomas. I told them all before I left. They send their love and so on,” Jackson waved a hand. “Work's no problem. Don't worry about it, man.”

“Cool.” He was clearly trying not to let on his relief, and Jackson couldn't blame him. It had to suck to be all alone, dealing with some life-threatening mystery condition. And in *Toronto*, a soul-sucking hellhole at the best of times. Well, Jackson thought so; Cam disagreed, but never bothered to defend it too hard.

“So, it's just a waiting game? Your coach mentioned specialist test results. They got you doing all those fitness tests and heart monitors and shit?”

Cameron nodded.

Jackson stretched out his legs and breathed out, settling into the chair at Cam's bedside. “Well, we've got all day and night.”

All day and night to plan to grab Nathan by his greasy hair and chuck him out if he tried strolling back into his little brother's life yet again.

## Cameron

After the first night, the hospital insisted that Jackson couldn't stay in Cam's room. Cameron tried to pay for a downtown hotel, but Jackson said he had reward points to use up. When he came back, he smuggled in a pizza to share between nurse visits.

Cameron fucking loved his big brother.

Jackson had always been there for him, and now was no exception. Not that he blamed their little brother, Thomas, who was stuck in Halifax with work. He'd texted back and forth for a while with Cameron to pass on his best wishes and concerns. He was clearly worried, but Jackson and Cameron had both insisted that he should stay at work for now.

Having Jackson there for him was so much better for Cam. Those first few crushing hours facing the prospect of no passion, no job, and no boyfriend had passed. With company, he was more grounded and optimistic.

The first day or two of bed rest was a nice break from the constant intense training schedule.

By day three, Cameron was ready to break out of the hospital. Coach Walker had visited, as had many of his teammates. Most of them met Jackson for the first time, many for only the second or third, and all instantly liked him.

Everyone did. Jackson was just easy to get along with, for the most part. It made Cam smile.

Then, the doctor asked to see them all together – the coach, his brother, and him. That was reason enough to stop smiling.

Cardiac specialist Dr. Whitfield had been working on his case for the last couple days, but no tests had been conclusive so far. As he gazed at them all from across his imposing desk, Cameron already knew where this was going.

“So, you said you have answers for us?” Coach Walker wasn't buying into the ominous silence for a second.

Jackson nodded with the coach's words. Coach Walker sat on one side of Cameron, while Jackson flanked the other side.

"Yes." Dr. Whitfield fidgeted with the file folder on the desk in front of him. "Here's the thing, gentlemen. I've been going over it, over and over, and... nothing adds up. Cameron is going to need to get some serious testing done with a cardiology team... assuming it is a heart problem. There could be some other invisible illness causing it."

"Lupus?" Cameron quipped. Both Jackson and Coach Walker shot him looks. "Sorry."

Dr. Whitfield nodded. "Something like that. It's... you know, we can't guarantee your safety or even your life if you keep playing. All we know is that reaching peak physical exertion seems to trigger the response. Dizziness at first, escalating to fainting, obviously. Our fitness tests haven't replicated that yet, so we can't see *what* it is. It's stress-linked, too."

"So you're saying he should stop playing." Coach Walker's eyes were difficult to read. He wouldn't let the doctors slide away under some BS excuse.

Dr. Whitfield nodded. "Avoiding prolonged periods of elevated heart rates or short periods of highly elevated heart rates is best."

There was a long moment of silence while Cameron's stomach churned with distaste. *Come on, talk to him. Make them do more tests before they let me go.*

"You're not the first guy who had to leave right before he got an offer."

No.

"Or even after."

"No way," Cameron gritted, trying to keep his voice from cracking.

"You're young, you can find another career and kill it, whatever you choose. You've got the guts and strength. You're driven and loyal. You're *able* to do it."

Coach Walker had never talked to him this frankly, and Cameron wasn't ready to handle what that meant. "But--"

"Take two weeks off first, Cam," Coach Walker told him, and from his voice, there was no negotiation. Jackson watched him closely, just as the doctor and his coach were watching. "Spend time with your family and friends before you decide. Doc, how long before the referrals



come through?"

"We can try to fast-track you if you go private, but... months."

"And private isn't--"

"Cam," the doctor said, and the nickname from the professional made Cameron recoil and pay attention to him. "That first referral won't fix everything. How long have you been living with these symptoms?"

Cameron bit back his retort. Months, if he was honest, but it had started so small he hadn't noticed. There had been a little dizziness he'd attributed to performance anxiety every time he was on the ice. Then, numbness in his fingers or toes, a moment of heartsick tension in his stomach...

"That's what I thought," the doctor said. "This has been escalating, and it's not worth your life. If you're meant to play, you'll play in a year or two, when this is settled."

"Can I at least stay in shape?"

"Yes, but you *have* to stop at the first sign of relapse," the doctor said sternly. "No stressing out over it, no pushing yourself to your limits. You can rebuild muscle later, but your heart..."

Jackson reached out to grip Cameron's shoulder. "I'll make sure he doesn't push it," he promised.

Fuck, he didn't want to go home and face that shame – well, no, face Nathan. Would they become ugly roommates now? The kind who brought home men to spite each other?

"The whole family's gonna be home this weekend," Jackson told him. "Everyone has things to talk about. This has been... a scare for everyone."

Fuck. Stubbornly sticking around and killing himself over this sport would be selfish as hell.

With the weight of his involuntary decision lifted a little, Cameron nodded. "I'll come home with you."

---

The shuddering underneath became a smooth glide. The plane whined in the background, its props fighting through turbulence. Cameron leaned against the wall, gazing out the window as the plane climbed into the sky.

There went the tower, the harbor, the island, the arena...

Fuck, the arena.

He'd wandered past the shining glass and chrome, the giant red letters spelling out the center name, so many times. He'd sat in the bleachers, studying games, and he'd been invited into the locker rooms a few times.

It wasn't the coliseum where *his* team played, but... it was the home of the team he *dreamed* of playing for.

As they banked in one more smooth swoop before turning east, Cameron pushed the window shade down and leaned back in his seat.

He was leaving his skates, stick, and goddamn heart in Toronto.

Noah

Noah groaned as he rolled over in bed. His cellphone never stopped ringing these days. Even on a nice Saturday morning when he wasn't scheduled to work the exhibits, he couldn't have a moment's peace.

Then, he got over it and stirred awake, grabbing his phone and clearing his throat before he answered.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Noah, it's your uncle Bill."

"I know who it is," Noah laughed as he sat up. He'd had his number in the phone for years, but Bill still didn't get that cellphones had caller ID. "What's up?"

"I have a favor to ask."

Noah had a pretty good idea he knew what it was. It was farmer's market day. Every Saturday, Bill sold his honey, beeswax candles, honeycomb, beekeeping supplies, books, and more. His stand was well-known among the locals now and many people stopped by just to chat about the bees and how they could help save them.

His uncle probably needed help running it. Of all the things to do on a Saturday morning, the market wasn't bad. He knew all the other vendors by now.

"There's a swarm."

"Ah." That made it more urgent, then. Noah climbed out of bed and opened his drawers to find a clean, presentable outfit to wear. He was almost out of clean laundry. No time to do it while negotiating loans and commissioning pieces for the new hockey exhibition he was running at the local arena.

He resisted the urge to groan. It had been a fucking long week, one of those weeks from hell. But he wasn't going to say no to his uncle. "Um, give me... half an hour? I'll try and be faster."

"Thanks a bunch, kid."

"See you, Uncle Bill." He hung up and tossed his phone onto the bed,

then ran his hands over his face.

A lot could happen to an unguarded swarm in half an hour. He headed straight for the shower, grabbing a towel along the way. There was no time to waste.

---

“Early swarm this year,” Noah greeted his uncle when he managed to slide through gaps in the crowd and duck behind the table.

Bill shrugged helplessly. “I don't know why. The homeowner's panicking.”

“Right. Go on, you better catch 'em,” Noah encouraged him. “I'll take care of things here.”

“Thanks a lot,” Bill answered, clapping his shoulder as he rushed for the parking lot.

Finally, Noah breathed out. He hadn't even grabbed a proper breakfast – just a banana. He'd have to ask Susan or Lucy from the fudge stand if they'd watch the stall for a minute while he grabbed a pastry later.

He liked to be presentable all the time, even though he wondered why he bothered sometimes. On his sloppiest days, he styled his hair and wore a short-sleeved t-shirt over his long-sleeved t-shirt. He joked that he wanted to be ready to propose a date to some hottie.

Even when he had a boyfriend, he believed in looking his best at all times. It only ever earned him attention from the ladies at the fudge stall, but at least he scored free fudge.

Hmm. He could do fudge for breakfast. There was a brief gap in the crowd and Noah raised a hand to wave. “Morning, Susan!”

---

By eleven in the morning or so, the market was always at its busiest as people who woke up late came to shop or socialize. It was exhausting keeping up with everyone who wanted his attention.

Large groups of people wandered past the stalls together, pausing to glance at jars of honey or pollen. It was a whole different atmosphere – one that required a more extroverted touch than the morning sales did.

Noah sold all the honeycomb by noon, plus half the honey jars and

three books. He even passed out business cards for people who were interested in buying beekeeping supplies.

Now and then, he had a chance to chat.

“Hey, Ray!” he called out, waiting to attract the attention of the man at the houseplant stand on the other side of the aisle. “The game tomorrow's at three.” Ray nodded, then kept wolfing down his sandwich.

Noah helped run a little field hockey league – nothing serious, and he was pretty bad, but everyone involved had fun. Whoever won, they drank and laughed at bars downtown after each game.

That sandwich looked good and Noah's stomach was growling, too. He was considering stepping away from the stall to grab a samosa and run back. Before he moved away, though, someone approaching the table caught his eye.

Noah was starstruck.

This man was tall, broad, yet subtly muscled – not hulking with gross veins popping out everywhere. He wore a light t-shirt despite the spring morning, and Noah tried to drag his eyes away from the nipples poking against his white shirt.

Holy shit, his face was gorgeous. The stranger had dark brown eyes, a slightly crooked nose, and a smile that would charm the pants off a monk. And Noah's gaydar was going off like *crazy*, which made him ten times more nervous than if this had been some hot straight guy.

The stranger fidgeted as if nervous, too. He let another section of the crowd pass by, then slipped between them nimbly. Once he reached the table, he glanced down at the honey instead of at Noah.

*Say something.*

This was the moment to clinch the sale. Noah drew a breath, trying not to act completely nervous. He rested his hands on the table to keep them from shaking. “Hello. Can I help you?”

## Cameron

Holy shit, Jackson's house was cramped.

His brother had been trying to find a bigger place for a couple months now, but he'd never gone through with it. Something was always wrong – a flood risk or it needed too much work or it was *too* finished.

Cameron was grateful to stay with his brother, though he was getting too familiar with Jackson's basement laundry corner. He was wearing the same few outfits over and over from the duffel bag Jackson had grabbed from his house while he'd been in the hospital, and laundry was getting old.

As Jackson paged through real estate listings, Cameron tried to ignore the morning news. He hated watching the news. It was depressing and it never actually told him anything useful. Just more stabbings in Halifax and shit, and he didn't need to be worrying about Thomas all the time.

"I'm going down to the market," he told his brother. The farmer's market was something of a Fredericton tradition. A lot of people went to socialize in their small town and catch up with old buddies, not just get their produce. It would be nice to run into a few people he knew, even if most people he knew here had been in his high school graduating class.

A lot of that crowd was still hanging around, most of them done with university by now. Some had moved back home and some had never left. Then there were the older folks, friends of his parents' or teachers, who were glad to see him back home. He told them all it was a vacation back here after too long away and they always agreed.

"You should think about moving back," his old English teacher, Ms. Crawford, encouraged. "There's a lot going for young people. All the tech companies moving here. It's all from that town Internet access program."

"Right, right," Cameron nodded. He knew shit about Internet access programs, but it sounded like it made sense. "I've thought about it."

"I mean, unless your big sports career keeps you away. But a lot of

folks here would be glad to see you back,” she assured him.

Cameron smiled. “Well, you never know,” was all he'd commit to. “It depends which teams want me.”

“There's one starting up here.”

“Really?” There had been rumors for years. Cameron would believe it when he saw it. The town just wasn't big enough to sustain a pro team of its own. Minor leagues here never lasted long before getting bought out by another team and moved.

“Oh, yes. You should talk to people about it,” Ms. Crawford told him. She juggled her vegetable basket from one arm to the other.

“That looks heavy. I won't keep you,” Cameron nodded. “See you, Ms. Crawford. Great to meet you again.”

God, he'd sucked in her class.

His cheeks burned as he remembered the red ink on one paper with a typo in the title and three Wikipedia sources. He waved goodbye, then escaped through the crowds.

Honey? Sure. He could use honey... save the bees and all.

*Oh, shit.*

The man *behind* the honey table almost stopped him from going over to it, but not because he was unapproachable. Quite the opposite: he was *beautiful*, and there was no way in fuck he was straight. He stood tall, but he hadn't quite spotted Cameron yet.

It wasn't a rebound fling if Cameron just wanted to have a word with him. There was no way he'd wind up being single.

Cameron approached, picking his way through the crowd until he reached the table and the man greeted him.

“Hello. Can I help you?”

He sounded cheerful and bright, his voice warm and somehow familiar. It was the kind of comforting voice you'd expect from a nurse or physiotherapist.

*No, I need to get out of that mindset.* Not everything was about sports anymore.

“Hi,” Cameron answered, dragging his gaze from the honey jars up to the man. Angled cheekbones, the full, feminine lips, the bright brown eyes... the scruffy blond hair gelled up, then messed with.

He was offering Cam a smile and not the distant, suspicious expression he'd expected. His stereotypical once-broken nose and general broad build made people think he was a bouncer or a scrapper sometimes.

"Um, just taking a look at your honey," he answered, gesturing at the jars.

"Well, we're sold out of our fresh honeycomb, but we have lots of liquid honey left. There's small sample jars of a hundred mill's," the man gestured toward them. "And larger ones, of course."

"Is it all local?"

"From my uncle's hives."

Cameron licked his lips. "Oh, cool. He sells it to you?"

"Oh, no, this isn't my stand," the man smiled. "It's his. He's off catching a swarm, actually."

"A swarm?"

"Bee swarm. When they leave the hive en masse."

"Wow. I see." Cameron tried to think of something else to say just to hear that warm voice again. Sometimes it caught when he drawled his way through a syllable and that gorgeous Atlantic accent came out.

Cameron had missed the accents from home.

"Yeah. He has several hundred hives of his own, and manages a network of about a thousand more through a co-operative profit-sharing agreement." That sounded like a spiel.

"On his own?"

"Yeah. He wants an apprentice, but it's hard to find anyone our age who's interested in it. He tried twice and the guys left a month or two later. We're all leaving for Toronto or Fort Mac... you know how it goes."

Cameron frowned. *I was one of the kids who left for Toronto, too. Not doing the oil fields, though...* "Uh, is he still looking?"

The man stuck out his tasty lower lip in thought. "He might be. If you wanna stop by next week, he'll be here and he can talk to you about it. Or I can take your number..."

"Oh, I don't – I don't have a local number yet." Cameron didn't want to give away his Toronto number and get charged long distance – or worse, sound like he was trying to pick up this guy for a fling. Most



Ontarian visitors did that: fucked their way through town on vacation and left. He needed to sound interested in the job, though. "But I'll stop by next week."

"Okay. I'm Noah, by the way."

"Cameron. Or Cam's fine. Everyone calls me that." What was wrong with him? He usually got quiet, not chatty, when he was nervous.

"Nice to meet you, Cam." Noah reached over the table for a firm handshake. This was something else he'd missed: everyone did business with a handshake here, not sleazy contract lawyers and agents and the media. "See you later."

This wouldn't be a bad place to move back to, relatively speaking.

"See you." Cameron's skin tingled as he drew back, his heart still flip-flopping. For the first time in days, it wasn't in a bad way.

On his way out, Cam passed a plastic house-shaped box with a stack of real estate listing booklets. He opened the creaky metal handle to pull down the door and reach in for a brochure, then let it snap shut.

He flipped through the brochure as the scents of food and the sounds of excited residents faded. One listing in particular caught his eye.

*Score this hat trick of houses.*

He rolled his eyes but scanned underneath.

*A triple listing: great for an investor or a big family.*

Cameron's mind raced as he scanned through the three houses. They were each priced the same and had roughly the same features, but differed slightly in their upgrades. One had a better garden, another a better kitchen, the third had a good media room in the basement, and so on.

They all needed a little fixing up, but that was nothing he couldn't handle. He knew his way around light home renovations. He'd learn more from the hardware store or YouTube tutorials. Plus, the summer was coming up and it sounded like there was a job opportunity for someone to make a living as a beekeeper...

As Cam waited at a red light to cross the street despite no cars coming the other way, he thought the small town life was kind of tempting. Maybe moving back here would be the kind of change Coach Walker was talking about. Hell, maybe he could stop blaming himself for everything.

---

“Thomas! God, it's great to see you,” Cameron grinned as he held the door to his parents' house open for his little brother.

Thomas was a couple years younger than him, clever as a whip after graduating at twenty. Cam and Jackson had looked out for him, because the two of them had actually *been* gay, yet scrawny Thomas had wound up labeled the gay one at school.

Then again, Thomas hadn't actually told any of them about dating a girl, even since moving to Halifax. Cam quelled speculation by saying the chances of all three brothers being gay were pretty fucking small, but he wondered.

Their little brother kept himself to himself, but he was sweet and as loyal to their little family as could be. He was beaming, a grin breaking across that narrow face as he strode up and crushed Cameron in a hug.

Cameron pretended to stagger to his knees. “Mom! Thomas is picking on me!”

“Settle down, boys,” she laughed. Their father was laughing from the living room as he waited to greet their son.

“Welcome home, Thomas,” Mom added, hugging and kissing his cheek. She sent him into the living room to greet Jackson and Dad.

As they caught up on their trips home, everyone headed to the table for supper. Cameron ate even more than the other two, but he always had, to fuel his muscle growth.

“So, you're better?” Thomas finally broached when they were done their main course.

“Yeah, I'm good,” Cameron assured Thomas, feeling the nervous silence descending. “I'm just taking a couple weeks off to visit you guys and... you know, recover.”

“It was a shock for all of us,” Mom spoke up, her voice a waver. Cameron had hugged it out when he'd first gotten back, but she still seemed upset. Not that he blamed her – he still couldn't even provide a diagnosis or explanation.

“Well, now that you're back here... I mean, are you gonna... go back?”

Dad cleared his throat, but Cameron shook his head. “No, I don't mind,” he assured them with a quiet laugh. He was a grownup. He'd

tell Thomas to fuck off if he had to, but he honestly didn't. They shared many of their decisions and fears in this family. "I'm thinking about it."

"His coach thought it was a good idea," Jackson added. "He was pretty firm on that."

Cameron rolled his eyes. "I'm not just gonna stop playing, but... if that means getting out of competition..."

"Oh, Cam," Mom breathed out.

"Yeah, you worked so hard..." Jackson frowned, sympathetic despite his clear views that Cameron should quit.

No way would Cameron admit how much it stung. He just shook his head. "No, really. If I'd gotten signed, I'd have been moving all over the country, never seeing you guys... I mean, I missed it here a lot."

"You've barely been home," Dad agreed.

"Yeah, and that sucks. I mean, the money doesn't, but then all the guys blow it on..." *Hookers and cars and anything that won't show up on a test...* "You know, just empty stuff. Nobody banks it away." *I would have.*

"That's not a good lifestyle to be around if you don't want it," Thomas spoke up. Youngest or not, he was a voice of wisdom sometimes.

"No, exactly. What, are your bank coworkers partying too hard?" Cameron teased to take some of the attention off himself and find out a bit more about his younger brother. They hadn't properly talked in so long.

"No," Thomas laughed, then grew a little quieter. "No, but things are kind of sucking there, too. The new branch that opened up, where I'm working now-- uh, by the way, I transferred..."

"Yeah, I know." Jackson had filled Cam in on Thomas's transfer. He'd switched branches last month to move to a brand new branch downtown, and Cam felt bad that he'd had to be filled in on something that big.

"Okay. Um, things are pretty harsh there. The new boss is bad, and we don't have any loyal regulars yet. There isn't the atmosphere I liked," Thomas admitted, pushing his wine glass around. "I've thought about transferring here."

Their mother was concerned but growing tired. She tried to hide her drooping eyelids, but Cam spotted it. She'd been working all afternoon

on supper. "How about we go out to the bar and talk about it?" Cameron suggested. *I gotta talk to them about the houses, too.*

"Yeah, good idea," Jackson smiled. "Mom, Dad, you can get some rest. Now that Thomas is in town, he'll be getting us all up early for family bonding time..."

"Shut up," Thomas laughed. "That was *one* Christmas."

Mom interrupted with a wave of her hands and a laugh. "Go on, all of you. We'll get the dishes."

"We can--" Jackson started, but Dad shook his head.

"Just buy us dinner next time," their father teased. "I'm sure you boys can manage that."

"Oh, yeah, of course," they all clamored to agree. They all got to go out together so rarely that there'd be a fight to pay.

"Go on, scram. Let us get some peace, then," Dad added.

After the obligatory hugs and kisses, all three brothers set off for the bar.

---

"So, I had an ulterior motive," Cameron confessed over his beer, pulling out the folded real estate booklet.

They were all settled around a table in their favorite bar. It was the one Jackson had taken Cam to when he turned nineteen, then Cam had taken Thomas to last year on his nineteenth.

*I wonder how they'll take this.*

"You're looking at real estate now?" Thomas exclaimed while Jackson choked on his beer.

"Just look at the ad."

Both men leaned in across the table and Cameron pushed the ad toward them. It took a minute before it sank in.

"You're thinking... the three of us?"

"I'm not pushing you," Cameron hastened to tell them. "Thomas, you can always transfer back to your old branch, but if you were serious about wanting to come here..."

Thomas's eyes had lit up, and Jackson was beaming.

“No way, man,” Jackson exclaimed. “You’re serious?”

Cameron drew a deep breath and let it out. “Well, it’s worth investigating.”

“We never thought you would wanna move back here after a taste of the big life,” Thomas murmured. “Jackson and I even talked about splitting a duplex before...”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Jackson laughed. “But, man, this could be perfect. Thomas, do you think you can get a transfer again so soon?”

“I can swing it somehow,” Thomas nodded. “Pull strings if I have to.”

“I’d have to go home and get the other place cleared out and all that,” Cameron shrugged. “But if we’re serious... We can help take care of Mom and Dad when they need it, and... you know, be together.”

“I like it,” Jackson nodded. “But then, I’m already here. It’s up to you two.”

Thomas and Cameron exchanged looks.

When Thomas nodded, Cameron let his breath out.

*I can't believe I'm walking away from that dream.*

But, as he’d been trying to do all day, he did his best to reframe it in his mind.

*I'm **getting** something out of this, not losing everything.*

“And, for the love of God, we can all get boyfriends or girlfriends or whatever.” Jackson held up his beer in a toast. “And get our shit together.”

Cameron laughed and clinked glasses. “I think you two have your shit together. It’s just me.”

“Doesn’t feel like it sometimes,” Thomas laughed. “I always thought *you* two did.”

Jackson shook his head. “I thought *you* two did.” They shared in the next laugh. When they settled down again, all three of them were glowing with pleasure. Cameron’s chest was tight with pride he tried to hide: he’d brought them together again, at last.

“What about Coach Walker?” Jackson asked Cameron.

Even that didn’t dampen Cameron’s spirits. He had to face his coach

sometime; the sooner, the better. Cam didn't yet know if he'd be proud or disappointed.

Cameron rose to his feet. No time like the present. "Be right back."

He picked his way around rowdy students celebrating the end of exams and stepped outside, enjoying the cool breeze as he searched for his phone. Before he took it out, though, he spotted a familiar face and the other guy saw him at the same moment.

It was Noah, from the farmer's market. His lips were turned down, but the moment he saw Cameron, a smile broke across his face.

Cameron's cheeks flushed, and he told himself it was just the chilly April air. He didn't believe in signs, but he'd bumped into Noah just as he was about to change everything.

"Hi."

Noah's eyes glimmered, his rich voice a little strained with emotion. "Hello. Fancy meeting you here. Weird timing..."

"It is for me, too." Cameron hesitated. "You all right?"

Noah nodded, that cute blond hair bobbing in the light breeze. "Yeah. I'll be fine," he promised, his eyes flickering back and forth between Cameron's.

"Yeah?" Cameron wished he knew how to offer comfort, but whatever he was doing was working.

Noah's smile only grew. "I'll be great."

## Noah

It was the first time Noah had been stood up for a date since university. He was an ancient twenty-four years old now, and he hadn't had a lot of dates lately. It was a slap in the face after taking the time to get dressed up.

*Flaky-ass guys around here, Jesus.* It had seemed like a promising first date at a nice bar with an art appreciator. It wasn't that Russell was late; Noah had waited half an hour. He'd never had a date show up more than half an hour late and it wasn't like there was heavy traffic here.

Noah patted his hands together to ward off the spring chill. The nights were still damp, with most of the snow having only melted two weeks earlier. There were still tiny patches here and there in the shade.

That was it for dating, then – blind dating, at least. Noah would wait until someone showed interest in him. Someone like--

The bar door banged open, and the physicality of the man who walked out made Noah glance over. With Noah's pretty lips, swishing hips, and clingy jeans, he was always on guard.

But he didn't have to worry about Cameron.

Despite the chill, Noah's cheeks were warm. His heart pumped, blood rushed through his body, and his jeans were a little too tight. His fingertips tingled, so he pushed his hands into his pockets as he faced Cameron.

The way Cameron's eyes widened made Noah smile. He wasn't the only one who had taken note of the man at the market, then.

He struggled to get over Cameron's physical good looks and respond to small talk. Cameron picked up on his roller coaster of emotions. Far from feeling like a last resort, the way Cameron watched him made Noah feel like the center of the world for a few seconds.

"You all right?"

Noah managed to assure him that he'd be fine. In fact, a smile burst across his face.

“Well, that's better. You're cute when you smile.”

Noah's cheeks flushed red and he knew it. He could handle compliments like a grown man, but fuck, Cameron's roguish bad boy air set him off-kilter.

“Th-Thanks,” Noah answered, laughing under his breath. “Glad you think so. I just got stood up.”

Cameron's expression went from teasing flirtation to furrowed brows. Noah raised his eyebrows. Despite barely knowing him, the man was angry on his behalf.

“That's not right. I'm sorry, man.”

Noah shrugged, not wanting to be a downer. He wanted more attention – compliments, physical closeness... “It's my fault. He was a flake, in retrospect. I meet loser 'alpha' dudes who decide they don't wanna be seen in public with... you know.” The lisp slipped out despite his best attempt to prevent it, his *losers* and *seen* slipping through the night air.

Cameron didn't cringe. “Just out for a little Grindr action.” He nodded sympathetically. “Sorry. I mean, I'm sure everyone says it, but... what about someone more like you?”

“More feminine?” Noah teased, and he was thrilled at the pink staining Cameron's cheeks. Maybe it was just the cold, but maybe it had been *him* having that effect on Cam. “Don't worry. I don't mind people calling me that,” he added. “I've tried, but... we end up being friends. I just don't feel the chemistry. They don't turn me on like a guy who can haul me around.”

*Like him. Oh, fuck.* He hadn't even finished the sentence before he realized that Cameron's short t-shirt sleeves showed rippling muscles and strong forearms. They were lightly hairy and Noah wanted to run his palm across the hairs and make Cam's skin tingle. Cam's thumbs were tucked into the pockets of his jeans. *How isn't he cold in just a t-shirt?* As he dragged his gaze back up Cameron's body, a knowing smirk lingered on Cam's lips.

“N-Not that, you know, that's everything... but it just tends to be... a factor...” Noah bit off his sentence before it continued, watching Cameron smirk.

Then, Cameron leaned in and Noah's whole *body* tingled, even though they didn't touch. Cameron's feet shifted until their bodies faced each other. Cameron's foot was between Noah's. Warm breath tickled his



jaw as Cameron murmured, "You'd be cute to haul around, believe me."

Noah licked his lips. He *wanted* the burn of this man pressing up close to him, his strong hands closing around his arms or ass...

"But first," Cameron added, pulling back enough for them to make eye contact, "I'd like to hang out and... get to know you."

Noah hadn't expected the just-friends line right after *that* line. *Friends with benefits? Is that what he wants? Or is he looking for a... mature relationship, too?* Either way, he was interested.

"Yes."

Cameron laughed quietly. "I haven't even asked."

Noah cleared his throat. Cameron's eyes sparkled and nose scrunched when he laughed. "To a date. A get-to-know-you date." *He'd better not fall through and get shy at the last moment.*

"Are you asking me?" Cameron teased, but before Noah answered, he nodded. "That's what I'd like. I'd like your number first, though."

"Oh, yeah," Noah murmured, fumbling for his phone to pull it out of his pocket.

They swapped numbers and Noah raised his eyebrows at Cameron's first few digits: 905. "From Toronto?" he asked. Cameron nodded. "How long are you visiting? When works?"

"I'm mid-move, actually. I'm here for another week and a half, and then I fly back to Toronto to finish packing up and properly move."

*Oh, so he's very new to town. Why move here without a job lined up?* Noah nodded. "Um, you free this weekend?" That was the obvious choice. "Oh, no, I have a hockey game."

"Ah." A startled expression crossed Cameron's face, and Noah fought his immediate reaction: annoyance. Most guys built like Cam had been the star hockey kids. They could never believe that "someone like him" would be into playing hockey at all.

Noah decided to continue. "And next weekend, I'm building wooden boxes for my uncle's beekeeping business."

"I've done carpentry." Cameron winked.

*Oh my god, is he offering...?* "Oh, I – I can't put you to work on the first date!" Noah laughed, and Cameron joined in with a chuckle. "And

honestly, I don't want to wait that long.”

Cameron wasn't turned off by his frank admission. “This week, then? Monday evening?”

“Yeah. Perfect,” Noah nodded. Monday evening wouldn't force him to wait *too* long, but it was going to feel like an eternity anyway.

“Can't wait.” Cameron gave him another of those perfect, gleaming, genuine smiles. How did his teeth glow in the darkness? Had he had them whitened? Noah tried not to let it distract him.

“Me, too.”

*I should get home before I embarrass myself. Jesus.* Noah's hands almost shook with nerves. “O-Okay. I'll see you. Text me and we'll set up the details.”

“Will do,” Cameron promised, lingering near the door of the bar and waving. It was a sweet moment, and Noah relished it.

Noah raised a hand. He strode down the sidewalk, thankful that the concrete was bare now. It was a quicker getaway when he didn't have to tiptoe across slick patches. He resisted the urge to glance over his shoulder.

Despite the chill, a pleasurable glow deep in his belly warmed him.

## Cameron

“Hello, Ms. Henley? This is Cameron Riley. I'm in town at the moment and my brothers and I saw the ad for the three-house package. I know you might be off Sundays, that's no problem, but we'd like to get a tour on Monday, if possible. Here's a number where you can call me back...” Cameron hated leaving messages. He gave Jackson's number to call back so Rogers wouldn't nail him on long-distance.

Jackson loved working in the early hours, so he was already at his workshop while they waited for Thomas to wake up. Cam was used to waking up early for practice in pitch dark, bone-chilling winter.

“Well, no sense waiting around.” Cameron grabbed his jacket and headed for the door. If they couldn't get a formal tour that day, he'd go check out the neighborhood, at least.

The day was brisk but sunny, for which Cameron was grateful. His winter in Toronto had been snowier than usual, so it was nice to bask in sunshine without choking on the cold. Sure, Cam had grown up on skates and handled the cold better than most. Didn't mean he didn't love the warmer weather of cross-training season.

Cameron found the package – three empty houses in a row, but spaced apart well with privacy fencing. That wouldn't work for their family, so he'd install gates. The siding needed painting on all the houses for curb appeal. Those front porches looked old, too... and there wasn't much landscaping. That wasn't even counting updating the dated rooms inside.

But Cameron wanted a project to stay busy while he sat on his ass instead of training like he'd done every summer since he was eight.

“They look good,” he murmured under his breath, just for some company. As he walked back past the three houses, he headed downtown to window-shop in the boutiques.

He soon met more people he knew: his parents' friends, a family doctor, and a professor. Everyone was happy to see him – and everyone asked about his hockey career. He brushed them all off by telling them it was a vacation.

He didn't want to tell them all he'd fucking *failed* the one thing he'd been born to do.

Cameron grabbed a newspaper and fresh pastries, then walked to one of his favorite parks to eat and catch up on local news.

The paper was filled with small-town matters from fundraisers to opinion letters on the town council. By chance, Cameron spotted an Events article about an art show coming up at the hockey arena, curated by a Noah.

The same Noah whose pretty dark eyes and smile enchanted Cameron already? He *did* look like an art curator. He'd have to ask.

There was also an ad for a casual men's hockey club. Cameron flipped the paper shut. No sense tempting himself.

Time to get home and make the most of the day with Thomas and Jackson. Having his brothers around all the time would be a change, and they still had a lot to catch up on. Thomas and Jackson had been closer than him since he'd always been away for practice or camp.

And then, of course, he had to get in touch with Noah's uncle about that beekeeping job...

Cameron had to pull his weight wherever he could until he found a new purpose.

## Jackson

Jackson had barely stopped work to grab lunch when his phone rang.

"Hi, it's Jessica Henley. I got a message with this number from a Cameron Riley, inquiring about a real estate tour."

"Yeah, that's my brother." Jackson untied his apron and shrugged it off, hanging the heavy garment on a rack. "He's got a Toronto number still."

"Oh, I see. I understand you and he wanted to tour the package of three houses?"

"Yes, with our brother Thomas. The three of us want to move home – well, I'm already here, but they'd be coming back."

"That's wonderful that you're serious buyers. I'm available this afternoon at three, if that's a convenient time for you."

"That's perfect," Jackson agreed. Thomas had the next couple days off before he drove back to Halifax. "Shall we meet you in front of the houses?"

"Yes, is that fine? I'm assuming you know where they are if you live here?"

"Yep, of course," Jackson invited her chuckle with his own. "In front of them at three?"

"Perfect. I'll see the three of you then."

"Thank you, Ms. Henley," Jackson answered, and when they hung up, he pumped his fist.

With his brothers in town, he could have the family reunions he'd always sort of daydreamed about. He'd never thought Cam would come back to Fredericton after getting recruited to Toronto. Superstars never came home until they retired. Million-dollar mansions and celebrity parties outshone the four or five fancy restaurants here.

Jackson tidied up his tools before he left his rented workshop space. He'd be glad to get a backyard workshop set up after they moved.

Cameron worried him, though. That fucking ex of his. He always wormed his way back into Cam's life with a few apologies and a sweet gesture, and Cam always fell for it. He was too kind. Could Cam tear himself away from his sport and his old love all at once?

He called Thomas first to tell him the news. The phone rang twice before his brother picked up, his voice rough around the edges. "Hey, Jackson."

"Afternoon, lazy boy," Jackson teased. "You up and around?" He liked to poke fun at the guy for sleeping in whenever he visited town for a weekend.

"I've been up for an hour, thanks," Thomas grumbled. "Some of us have real jobs, you know."

Jackson just laughed off the snide comment. Thomas *definitely* hadn't been up for an hour if he had that attitude, but he didn't call him out on it. "So I heard back from the realtor. We can do the tour today."

"You told Cam yet?"

"No. Um, listen, on that note..." Jackson trailed off.

"Yeah?"

"I'm worried about him." Jackson didn't want to talk about Cam behind his back, but this was a pretty big change. "You know about his ex, right?"

"Yeah, Nathan? You told me." The scorn dripped from the name when Thomas said it. It was pretty much how Jackson felt, too; but when Thomas let such strong emotions slip, he was pissed.

"Well, that asshole's always had that way of, you know..."

"Winning him over again."

"Exactly. And what with that and having to quit hockey, you know..."

"He might not be thinking straight? I don't know. He seems more clear and grounded than he has in years," Thomas told him.

Cam *was* more focused, especially over the last day or so. He was getting his feet back on the ground. "Yeah. But if Nate comes back..."

"We'll sit down with him," Thomas promised.

"I've told him before, but he never listens. Exes should stay exes. You broke up for a reason, fuckin' stay broken up." Jackson pushed back the living room curtains to check for Cam.

Thomas didn't say anything.

Jackson hesitated, then shook his head. *It's probably nothing.* "Anyway, you comin' over or what? I can put on lunch for us all and we'll head out to the house tour."

"Sounds good. I'll be there in half an hour," Thomas promised.

"Soon as you get out of bed?"

"Bye," Thomas groaned and Jackson laughed when the line cut off with that. He sent a quick text to Cam to let him know the news, then headed to the kitchen.

---

"Hey, I'm back! Holy crap, that smells good."

Jackson laughed at the early feedback from his brother. "Thanks," he answered, glancing around the kitchen corner. Cam was kicking off his shoes. "It's just sauteed onions, but it always smells like supper. My home ec teacher taught me how before I switched out for workshop class."

"I'll keep that in mind. So, we got the house tour!"

"Yep," Jackson smiled, and his heart lifted at the smile on Cam's face. His brother looked his age again, his nose and smile a little crooked. He hadn't been moping about his diagnosis, then. Good.

"Thomas's on his way. We'll have lunch and then he just has to drop off something to Mom and Dad and escape again before the tour."

"Cool. Need a hand with anything?"

"Nah, I've got it. Grab a couple beers for us, we can eat outside."

"Before he's back, though, I wanted a word." One-on-one, Cam wouldn't feel cornered.

"'bout what?" Cam cracked open two beers, putting one beside Jackson and leaning on the counter nearby. His sideways gaze was sharp and perceptive as he watched Jackson. No wonder he'd been considered for captain: he was a lot smarter than he gave himself credit for.

"Are you gonna be... okay moving back here?" Jackson asked. It was the most hands-off way to ask the question.

"Oh, yeah," Cam assured him, his chest swelling as he lightly punched

Jackson's shoulder. "Getting cold feet already?"

"No," Jackson laughed. "I just worry. I'm a big brother, it's my job."

He'd said it for years, but for the first time, Cam looked at him – really looked – when he said it. Cam's face was set in a light frown, his eyes roving across Jackson's face while he fidgeted with his beer can.

"Are *you* okay?" Cam echoed. "I mean, man, I've hardly heard about your life lately. I was... pretty absent for a while."

"No, man, we all knew that was gonna happen." Was Cam feeling guilty now? Bullshit. He'd been training for one of the highest-paid and most demanding careers in the country.

"I mean, you're not dating or anything."

Jackson grunted. That was down to a couple bad relationships, a lack of eligible guys, and his focus on learning new work skills. He wanted to be the go-to blacksmith for everyone in the area from house builders to art galleries.

Didn't mean he didn't want to date, but Cam was one to talk.

*Oh. Wait.*

This was his way of trying to broach it, wasn't it?

"Neither are you now," Jackson pointed out, watching him. Cam looked away first, peering out through the small kitchen window to the picnic table. He had something to hide, then. "Or is Nate back?"

"No." That was far more vehement an answer than Jackson had expected, but it set him at ease. Cam didn't lie like this. "No, it's not Nathan. He can fuckin' stay gone. I'm just saying, I'm not *not* dating. I'm open to it."

*Has he already met someone?* "Oh. Good."

"Yeah." Cam was done with the conversation. A purr of an engine shutting off in the driveway announced Thomas's arrival. Talking about boyfriends was awkward one-on-one, let alone around their presumed-straight brother. Jackson let it go.

The doorknob jiggled. "You locking him out until he gives the password?"

"Oh, shit, I locked it after me."

"Toronto boy." Jackson laughed as Cam jogged to the living room and called out his apology. Maybe too much of a big-city kid right now,



but his brother would adjust.

He'd be okay.

## Cameron

"We're like the Three Stooges," Cam laughed as they all piled out of Thomas's car. Broad-shouldered Jackson and lean, yet muscled Cam contrasted slender, baby-faced Thomas.

A woman in tailored trousers and a blazer smiled as they approached. "You must be the Riley brothers," she greeted them all with handshakes and introductions.

"It's our pleasure," Cam responded, speaking for the other two. He'd always been the spokesman, for no particular reason. Jackson was talkative enough and Thomas wasn't reticent, but they both yielded to him when he was there. "Which house should we go to first?"

"Let's start at this end and work down."

The houses weren't anything Cam hadn't seen before and the first two were especially plain, but he reminded himself they weren't million-dollar postage stamp lofts.

The first house caught Jackson's eye because it had a large, prime workshop space. He said he could easily bring it to code for his forge. The second needed more work, but a gorgeous feature nook in the living room caught Thomas's eye.

As they reached the third house, Cam's stomach clenched. Was he going to like it? Compared to a condo with a view of Toronto stretching out in front of him, minutes away from shopping malls...

*Compared to having to share that view with Nathan*, he reminded himself. That was enough to jar him to attention as they walked up the path.

"This one's a bit different," Jessica told them. "People touring it are very hit or miss about it. It wasn't built by the same builder like the last two – which was why they were both similar."

It took just one look before Cam saw what Jessica had meant.

The living room was extremely bright with windows on two sides, and tall. Exposed beams crossed an open loft ceiling. A staircase snaked up to the top floor that overlooked the vaulted space. A semicircular nook

against the bannister would serve as a small spot to relax. It was braced by a support post downstairs and he made note to find the engineering plans.

The kitchen was the most up-to-date of the three houses, and the open plan meant they already saw clear through to the glass back door and a spacious yard.

Cam loved it. He even had options for carpentry space: a walkout basement and a small outbuilding that needed roof repairs.

“Not my style,” Jackson chuckled when they concluded the tour, and Thomas nodded his agreement. It was a city loft in a house, which wasn't their style. Just as well – Cam wouldn't have to fight them for it.

“So, that's it for the three houses. Let's lock this one up and head back out.” Jessica led them back to the front sidewalk while Cameron followed, taking one more glance up at the gorgeous vaulted living room.

Thomas asked the question they were all thinking once they reached the sidewalk. “Are there any offers in on this place?”

Cameron held his breath for a second until Jessica shook her head.

“Someone was going to move here from Alberta and put in an offer, but... things didn't work out for him, I understand,” she answered. “So the owner's open to offers.”

“That's great,” Jackson spoke up. “We'll have to have a chat and call you by – say, five?”

Cameron noticed Thomas's startled little glance his way. Their kid brother still rented out in Halifax. He didn't know how fast the market moved.

“That's fine by me. You have my cellphone number,” Jessica told them, shaking hands again. “See you soon.”

When they were all back in Thomas's car, Cam leaned forward to brace his arms on the back of Thomas's seat. He watched Jackson as they pulled away from the curb for the short drive back to his house. “So?”

“Wow,” Thomas breathed out. “That's... that's a lot to take in.”

“What is?”

“They all need some work.”

“Luckily you know a guy who did a carpentry apprenticeship and has a lot of free time,” Cameron teased.

“You said you're a retired hockey player.” Jackson repeated, twisting in his seat to make eye contact.

Cameron swallowed but nodded firmly. “I already made up my mind at the restaurant when we decided to do this.” He avoided the emotional moment by switching right back to the subject of the house tour. “Did you guys like the first two? Neither of you were sold on the third one.”

“I liked the first one, and I think you liked the second, hey, Thomas?”

Thomas nodded. “And you were sold on the third from the moment we walked in.”

Cam couldn't deny it. “Yeah. I didn't know anywhere here had that kind of architecture.”

“It did suit you,” Jackson admitted. “I suppose you'll want me to custom-make some railings, huh?”

*Oh, shit, that would be cool.* Cam's jaw dropped as he stared at Jackson, already imagining the possibilities.

“Don't strain his heart,” Thomas teased. The joke was cautious and even Jackson glanced at Cameron to make sure he laughed before chuckling.

“Fuck off,” Cam told Thomas, slapping his shoulder and leaning back in his seat again. “Anyway, I'm sold.”

“Do we wanna risk losing it? Offer lower?”

Thomas cleared his throat. “Well, I was doing some research and it's been on the market for a while. She even said the owner's willing to negotiate. I'm guessing a three-house package is harder to move than they expected.”

*Man. We can actually do this. I can actually do this.*

Cameron was a little worried about the mortgage, but it would be way cheaper than Toronto rent. He'd find a way to make it work – by manual labor, if he had to. It wouldn't be the same kind of stress that triggered his heart problems. Carpentry, beekeeping, teaching kids to skate – anything low-stress... He'd do whatever he had to.

“So, when are we gonna put in the offer?” Cam asked.

“Today?” Jackson asked, glancing in the rear view mirror.

Cam met his gaze and nodded firmly. “Today.”

“Today,” Thomas repeated in a murmur. Silence fell until they pulled up to the curb outside Jackson's cramped house – which, if all went well, would soon be up for sale.

Jackson shook his head before Cam climbed out of the car. “Don't drop us off. Let's go tell Mom and Dad.”

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Their parents were ecstatic, and the brothers' offer was filed with only a few hours' worth of phone calls and paperwork. Jessica had told them it would likely be a few days. They'd had to sign an irrevocable clause to leave their offer on the table for two days so the seller could receive other offers.

Once they left the stuffy real estate office, Thomas headed to their parents' home while Jackson and Cameron headed to Jackson's house for a quiet supper. Celebrations would come after the offer was accepted... if it was accepted.

While Jackson flitted around looking at his furniture and muttering about boxes, Cameron's phone went off. He didn't even have to reach in his pocket to know who it was. Cameron had been expecting this call all weekend.

“Be back in a bit.”

When he sat on the picnic bench, Cameron pressed “answer” on the incoming call. “Hey, Coach.”

“Hey, kid. Haven't heard from you in a while. I thought I know what that means, but I wanted to make sure.”

Cameron swallowed. That was Coach Walker reprimanding him for not having the guts to call first and admit that he was deserting the team. “Yeah. Uh, I've been doing some thinking.”

“Don't hold back.”

“I'm moving back home. I'm quitting. At least... until I get my heart fixed. Maybe later, if I'm still... anywhere near the skill level I'd need to be to get back on the team...” Cameron trailed off.

There was silence for a long minute – near-silence, anyway. Spring birdsong was loud here. He lay back on the bench, staring up at the

bright clouds as the sun tried to burst through.

“You sure about that?”

“Yeah,” Cameron said, his voice quiet. “I can't let it kill me.”

“I'm proud of you, kid. Everyone says it's quitting, but it takes guts to walk away while you're ahead. And to look after yourself. Can't say I'm not disappointed I'll never see your full potential, though. You had a lot more in you.”

Fuck. This sounded so final.

“Thanks, Coach Walker. I was gonna call, but... got caught up in the house hunt,” *and meeting gorgeous men*, “and wrapping my mind around it all is still pretty... you know.”

“I know.” After a moment, his voice quieter, the coach repeated, “I know. Look, I'm glad you're choosing your family and your future. The other guys might laugh, but in ten years they'll have a lot less than you if they don't play their cards right. I hope they all do, but you've got a good head on your shoulders.”

The coach had never said these kinds of things to him, let alone all at once. It only reaffirmed Cameron's suspicions: this *was* goodbye.

“Um, you guys still having the season-end party after locker clean-out?”

He didn't dare mention the game. The series was tied three-three and game seven was on Thursday.

He wasn't gonna be there, even in the stands.

*Traitor*, his brain said.

Coach Walker knew what he was thinking.

“Yeah. You're coming, of course,” the coach told him in a voice that left no room for argument. “You gotta tell the guys yourself.”

“They already know, don't they?”

“Yeah, but they deserve to hear it.”

“I know,” Cam admitted. Coach Walker was right, as always.

“Are you coming to locker clean-out day?”

Cameron rubbed his face. He had to. It was in his contract. But all the media questions: what was he doing next? Was he drafted? Why hadn't he been on the ice? If the guys lost on Thursday, did he feel

responsible?

“Maybe. As long as the journos don't fuckin' skin me.”

“I'll make sure they don't,” Coach Walker promised. “Come by later, around four.”

Cameron's flight back was early morning, so he could make it if he packed fast. Besides, he wouldn't miss the party for his life. “Pass on my love, a'ight? They're gonna do great.”

“Will do. See you there, kid. Take care.” There was warmth in the man's voice, and Cameron smiled.

His own brain still screamed at him that he was being a traitor and letting the others down, walking away from the chance of a lifetime. At least he had someone on his side who understood that voice in his head, and that made all the difference.

## Cameron

Monday passed without word back on the offer. None of them expected to hear back until Tuesday, when the owner would have to accept or reject it. It was a frustrating distraction, but also good since Cam had his date that day.

He forgot about all his stresses when he spotted Noah waiting outside.

As always, he was *gorgeous*. His light blond hair was wispy, gelled up in a nice textured cut that Cameron kind of envied. He'd always kept his hair close-cropped to keep him safer in fights. He greeted Noah with a cheery, "Hey. Nice haircut – did you just get it done?"

Noah spun on his heel, then beamed. "Thanks! Yeah, I went out on my lunch break today," he admitted, shifting from foot to foot. Adorable.

Cameron tried not to let on that he was just as nervous.

"Let's head in," Cameron told him, opening the door to the trendy new bar and restaurant.

"You chose a good place," Noah told him. They approached the maitre-d's station and waited for someone to seat them. "I come here sometimes after work."

"Oh, yeah? You work nearby?"

"At the gallery just down the road."

"The national gallery?" Cameron's eyebrows rose. "Nice."

"Thanks," Noah smiled.

"Evening, gentlemen. A table for two?" the waiter greeted as he approached.

Cameron nodded. "Thanks."

They followed along to a cozy, romantic private corner booth with a lit candle on the table. "Will this do?"

"Great, thanks," Cameron approved. Had the waiter guessed that it was a date?



“Let me run over the specials with you.”

After hearing about a warm cheesy chicken pasta, Cameron safely tuned out. His mind was made up. He asked for something local on tap, and Noah guided his choice.

Once they had their beers and were settling back in the booth, they finally got a proper chance to see each other.

Noah had a delicate build with a thin face, full lips, thick brows, and a beautiful angular jaw. Jesus, he looked like a model.

Cameron's heart skipped a beat. He was a sucker for a pretty face like anyone else, as much as he was trying not to make this about a rebound. Noah had been studying him at the same time, and Cameron wondered what he saw and if he liked it.

“So,” Noah broke the silence with a smile. “How was your day?”

“Uneventful,” Cameron admitted. “I was waiting around all day in case a real estate agent called...”

“Oh, are you house hunting?”

“My brothers and I found these properties we think are great,” Cameron told him. “We should hear back by tomorrow, and I fly out Thursday to pack up and move out of Toronto.”

“So you're coming here,” Noah said with a marveling smile. “What a time to run into you.”

“Yeah, I know,” Cameron chuckled. “It's kinda nice. I'm not moving here knowing nobody.”

“Are you from around here? I'm not,” Noah admitted. “My uncle wound up moving here to buy a business about a decade ago, but I was born in Alberta and raised in Ottawa.”

“Oh? I'm from here, yeah. How'd you end up in Ottawa?”

“My parents' jobs.”

Cameron liked the smoothness on his palate followed by a hint of a bitter twist at the end of his beer. It wasn't the bland stuff he drank at team parties just to get drunk. “What do they do? Or did they do?”

“My mom was an art gallery curator.”

“Oh, so you're following in her footsteps,” Cameron smiled. That rang a bell. “Hey, are you curating a show at the arena?”

“That's the one! You heard?”

“Saw it in the paper.”

Noah pumped a fist and Cameron laughed, nearly spilling his beer from surprise. “Sorry,” Noah blurted, holding out a hand to steady the glass.

Their fingers brushed.

Cameron's hand burned, a tingle shooting straight up his arm. His heart squeezed with warmth and even his thighs tingled, a shiver running down his spine.

Holy shit, they had chemistry.

Noah's lips were parted as he drew his hand back slowly and sat straight again, their eyes locking.

Fuck, he had pretty eyes.

“Well,” Cameron chuckled under his breath. Better to acknowledge the moment than pretend it hadn't happened.

“Yeah.”

“I'm trying to be good,” Cameron admitted, bracing his elbows on the table. “I mean, I was never the type to just... you know, go home with anyone... but I broke up not long ago.”

Understanding flickered across Noah's face, but instead of being wary, he just smiled. “Aw. Yeah, I get it. Sorry.”

“No, it's fine. That's part of coming back home. I'm moving out of the place I was living with my ex. But I don't want to dump all that on you.”

“Were you living together for a long time?”

*Thank God, no.* “No. The last year, off and on, but only steady for the last two months,” Cameron told him. “But we're through now for sure,” he assured Noah. “It wasn't working out. I want something more... mature, but it doesn't have to be right away.”

Noah nodded along. Those sweet dark eyes flickered between Cameron's as he fidgeted with the hair at the back of his neck with a couple fingers. His wrist bent loosely across his shoulder. The intense focus of his gaze made Cameron almost trip over his tongue.

“What about you?”

"I've been single for about a year and a half, I guess."

"Is that a long time for you, or are you the infrequent dater?" Cameron asked.

"I... well, I dated through college, and then I sort of stopped when I got here. Like I said, I tried to go on dates but nobody here wanted to come out, and those who're out already have boyfriends."

Cameron nodded. "It was a lot like that growing up, but even more strict. Things are better now. But after Ottawa..."

"Exactly," Noah chuckled. "But I like it here. The slow town pace... there's just something enchanting, you know?"

Cameron nodded. He would have nodded even if he had no idea what Noah meant, his voice was so persuasive in its subtle, gentle tones. "What about family? Mine are all here. Yours still in Ottawa?"

"Yeah," Noah sighed. "That's my one regret. We haven't always got on perfectly, but things have been better lately. But I had to come out here for my career. Curator jobs don't always open up, especially in the capital."

Cameron didn't notice time passing, their conversation was so smooth. Over supper, they talked about Noah's experiences at the art gallery and Cameron's memories of the city.

It was just *easy* to spend time with Noah. He kept thinking about how much he wanted to crowd into Noah's space and pin him against the bedroom wall and kiss him so slowly he begged for it...

Heat staining his cheeks, Cameron pulled himself out of the thought to choose a dessert.

By the time they were done, they were loose and relaxed around each other. They joked easily and brushed their hands together as they left the restaurant.

Noah was nice and normal – especially compared to certain exes. He was sweet, career-driven, loyal to his family, a little self-absorbed about his appearance, but clever when it came to art. Cam had no idea what he meant when he talked about trends and movements, but he tried to learn.

For his part, Noah could hardly keep his eyes off Cameron, either.

As they reached the sidewalk, Cameron cleared his throat. "So, you've got work in the morning, huh? I should walk you home. You live nearby?"

"Yes. Oh, that's *sweet!*" Noah's lisp was so strong even Cameron had to laugh. Noah joined in with a sheepish expression.

"The lisp's cute," Cameron assured him. "Not something you hear around here a lot. I *can* use it, I just... you know. Don't."

"Gay as the day is bright," Noah shrugged with a carefree smile at Cameron. He nodded down the street toward his house and they started to walk. "I like it that way."

Cameron glanced over. He'd been contented to spend years in that space between the closet and public knowledge, but Noah faced things he didn't every day. At least Fredericton was better now. Jackson had gotten suspended four times one school year while he paved the way for Cam's class. "Yeah? You don't ever get annoyed with people... I don't know, assuming things?"

"Of course. They assume things when they look at you, too, don't they? That you're a big, fit, straight guy with a sweet girlfriend... you work on a farm or the oil rigs..."

"I hope not," Cameron laughed with surprise. Before he even drew breath, Noah's hand was slipping into his. His heart squeezed as he laced his fingers with the thinner ones between his own. Noah's hand was cold, and he wanted to radiate warmth even as his skin tingled with pleasure at the contact. "Yeah. That's true." It was a weird conversation for a first date, but he appreciated Noah's direct, sly humor.

"So, you're not closeted, or...?"

"No," Cameron assured him. "My family all know. I've always been kinda quiet at work, but not because I'm hiding. Everyone knows. I think they just don't want to make comments because I'm usually bigger than them. Then they stopped caring." He'd been one of the bigger, tougher guys on the team. It had only taken a couple months for the mildly homophobic bros to learn better.

They turned the corner toward the graveyard and cut through it.

"That's good," Noah approved. "So, why leave Toronto if you don't have a job lined up here?"

"I want to be around my family. I've got some savings so I can float 'til I find something. I'm a decent carpenter so I can find work through my brother's business if I have to. If the beekeeping thing with your uncle works out, so much the better. I have some skills I can teach. I'll figure things out," Cameron told him with a confident smile, and Noah

mirrored it.

"It's nice to be around a guy who isn't moping about work, you know."

"Yeah, the same about you," Cameron agreed. "Hearing you talk about the... post-Atlantic-fishery periods, or whatever..."

"Close enough," Noah chuckled as he squeezed Cameron's hand. They waited to cross the street on the other side of the little park. "I'm glad it's not too nerdy."

"Nah," Cameron assured him.

"I live right over there."

"Cute little house," Cameron approved. It was only a fifteen-minute walk from Jackson's place and ten minutes from the potential new house. Noah's white-sided house had a small front yard and three floors. "An apartment?"

"Nope, the whole thing."

"Cool." They crossed the street to stand in front of the stairs, still holding hands. Cameron finally moved to drop Noah's hand and face him. "Man, this was a great first date."

"Wasn't it?" Noah agreed, his teeth flashing in a sincere smile. "I liked it, too." Noah looked him up and down.

Cameron's groin tingled with the desire to slip his hands around Noah's narrow waist and down his straight hips to the curve of his ass.

It wasn't his imagination: Noah's breathing was heavy. His gaze slid down to Cameron's lips and he licked his own in a clear invitation.

Cameron leaned in, cupping Noah's cheek in his palm as their lips met for the first time.

*Oh, fuck.* He wanted to turn their fascination with each other in conversation to curiosity about each other's bodies and pleasures...

Noah's lips pressed hard against his. When his tongue pressed at Cam's lips, Cameron plunged his tongue into Noah's mouth and Noah moaned under his breath.

Smooth hands cupped Cameron's face in a clear signal not to pull back. Cameron stepped closer instead, slotting his thigh between Noah's and pressing their chests together.

"Mm," Cameron murmured, pulling back from the kiss for long enough to catch his breath and make eye contact. He wanted to make

sure Noah was good with this.

Noah was *more* than good with this. His breathing was harsh, his body angled toward Cameron's. His eyes were wide and dark with hunger. Cameron loved the pink flush across Noah's cheeks, and it was easy to feel his grip on the back of Cameron's neck.

Noah yanked Cameron back in to kiss him. Cameron laughed with surprise before warm lips sensually slid against his own again. They breathed together through their noses, their bodies melting together in the cool spring evening.

Cameron's cock hardened in his jeans. Noah's hands were wandering and it made his stomach clench with arousal.

The images flashing through his mind were hard to control. This man was a goddamn great kisser. Noah's lips pinched around Cameron's lower lip to suck it before letting it gradually pop free from the kiss.

Cameron yearned for an invitation inside, but this *wasn't* a rebound. He had to control himself.

When Cameron finally pulled back, sparks still flew between them. Noah's eyes were on Cam's lips like he wanted to lean in for a third round.

It was a sentiment Cameron shared. This was the hottest chemistry he'd felt for *years*.

"Wow," Noah breathed out, his voice a little shaky as his hands slipped from Cameron's shoulders. "Um, that was a good night kiss for the ages."

Cameron burst out laughing, his cheeks burning with heat. "We might have gotten carried away..."

"Good," Noah murmured. Even though they weren't touching, he still stood just inches away, his breath warm against Cameron's chin.

"So, we'll see each other... soon?" Cameron asked. "When are you free?"

"Wednesday?" Noah suggested.

Cameron grinned. *He's feeling just the same, I bet.* That was the night of the game, but... "Wednesday's great," he murmured, his eyes flickering between Noah's. He took both of Noah's hands, swaying closer for a proper good night kiss.

This one was slower and sweeter, but there was a sensual tinge to it,

too. Parted lips rubbed across each other's for a few moments before he pulled back. The brush of warm breath, the tingle of firm, kiss-swollen lips together... "Good night," Cameron murmured.

"Good night," Noah answered, letting go of Cameron's hands with a smile and a wink. He trotted up the wooden steps to his door, fumbling for his keys. Cameron waited until Noah had them before walking off.

This time, Cameron glanced back at the same moment as Noah. They shared a smile just for a moment, and then Cameron crossed the street again through the early evening.

Cameron's whole body still tingled. He was certain he was going to be glowing even when he got back to Jackson's place.

*Fuck, I can't wait for a house of my own. More than that... Fuck, I'm crushing on Noah.*

It wasn't the closely-guarded affair he'd expected. It wasn't secrecy and trying to tiptoe around to keep this potential new guy in his life happy. It was... light, fun, and sexy.

*A date the same day we'll hear back about the house.*

What a day that was going to be.

Noah

That was the best first date Noah had ever been on.

At first, he hardly remembered why he was rolling out of bed with a smile on a Tuesday morning when it was raining outside. It took just seconds to remember: the guy who had listened so well to him, walked him to his door, kissed him like a fucking *rock star*...

“Oh, man,” Noah groaned as he rolled out of bed for the shower. Even thinking of Cameron made his body tingle, and then there was their good night texts. Only a couple, back and forth:

*I had a great time. Thank you for coming out with me. Safe walk home,*  
Noah had sent.

Minutes later, Cameron had answered, *So did I. You're cute. Can't wait for Wednesday. Good night xx.*

Were those hugs or kisses? Noah had fallen asleep last night trying to decide.

He scrubbed his body, well aware that he craved the attention he hadn't gotten last night.

Oh, fine. What could it hurt? He had a spare few minutes to spend thinking about Cameron holding him firmly, kneading into Noah's back to drag him closer...

Even if it was just friends with benefits, Cameron was fucking hot and Noah would agree to it. He just... hoped for more. Cameron's words had been so promising.

Instead, Noah turned his attention to the memory of Cam's “gonna fuck you” eyes.

---

Noah hunched into his raincoat for the walk to work and grimaced when his cellphone rang. The number was the director of the hockey arena hosting his art exhibit.



*It's gonna be one of those days. Everyone's going to ask things of me.* He shoved his phone under his hood to keep it dry and hunched forward a little. "Hello?"

"Hi, Noah. It's Jason. Miserable morning out there, isn't it?"

*Out here,* Noah thought but didn't comment. Some people still thought he was a bit weird for walking to work even though he only lived ten minutes' walk away. "Yeah, it is. April showers, right?"

"Bring May flowers? I hope you're right. So, about this little exhibition..."

*Little exhibition?* Noah bit back his annoyance. "Right?"

"The board is thinking of giving you half the space for the exhibition and reserving the other half for our permanent awards display."

*No way.* Jason had always been pretty straight-up with him, but there were bullshitters behind the scenes. "Why?"

Jason hummed. There was a story behind this. "Well, let's just say... someone with a particular attachment to the place thinks it's more important."

An ex-hockey player, then. Noah groaned. "I've commissioned stuff already – I've done a lot of work. Giving me half the space at the last moment? That wasn't our agreement.."

"I know," Jason said. "I'm sorry. I can understand that frustration."

*No, you can't.* "I'd politely disagree with this person," Noah continued. He straightened up despite the mist of rain that blew into his face. His speech was precise and crisp now. He'd practiced the non-accent to be taken seriously in his grad school classes. "Awards can be shown anytime, and they have been for years. I want to do something new."

"Well..." Jason drawled. He sounded like he wanted to agree. "I know, but there's some resistance to change. If you can appease them on the board, I'm sure I could try to have a chat with them."

Noah wracked his brain. "Why do they want the awards? Because of the local connection?"

"Yeah, they're all for local players."

Noah pressed a crosswalk button, gazing ahead to his art gallery. "Um, how about something custom? I already have two commissioned pieces, but I could possibly add more. I have enough room in my budget for a few more works."

"A contingency fund. Well done. I think that might do it. Email me with specifics and I can approach the people who make decisions over here," Jason promised. "No guarantees, but I'll do my best."

*What about some original drawings or paintings? I have the painted pucks and the steel sculpture, but not traditional pieces yet...* Noah was already thinking about local artists. "I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Thanks, Jason."

"Thanks. Talk to you later."

Noah shoved his phone back into his pocket. Fuck, this town was sometimes so resistant to anything new. People wanted to be recognized, and saw anything new as an attack on them. It wasn't like he was demanding the awards be taken down. He'd planned carefully to work the artwork around them.

*Time to check in on my commissions.* He unlocked the side door with his pass card and shook off his coat like a dog as he walked into the building. The unpleasant day had ruined his hair and dampened his trousers already. He was going to have to sit in front of the heater in his office for a while as he made these calls.

While his computer booted up, Noah leaned back in his chair and wheeled closer to the heater, the phone against his ear ringing.

"Hello?" the gruff voice on the other end answered.

"Hey, Jackson, it's Noah. Just wondering how things are coming along."

"I'll be ready in good time, don't worry. I built in a week of wiggle room, just in case."

Noah loved Jackson. "Oh, God. Thank you," he groaned.

Jackson laughed. "That bad, huh?"

"Oh, you don't want to know. Things are changing on me," Noah admitted. "But don't worry – there *will* be room for everything, especially your piece and the other commission. I'll arrange the loans around that."

"Good," Jackson approved. "Good on you for doing all this. It's not easy to get people to agree to new things around here."

"I enjoy it," Noah fibbed. He *did*, just not this particular second. "And it'll be great."

"I know it will. I should get back to it, then. I'm about ready to have

you come by and check on it... maybe this weekend?"

"That'll be great," Noah agreed, settling on a date and time. "Thanks a bunch, Jackson."

"Thank you," Jackson answered, polite as always. "See you."

At least someone around here kept his promises. Well, two someones... Cameron hadn't stood him up last night. And that had been an incredible date. Noah smiled to himself until he realized his name was being repeated from the doorway.

---

Noah was about ready to call it quits that day when another light knock sounded on his office door. He'd had to lead Sarah's guided tours since she was off sick that day. Then, a coworker and his boss had both checked in about that damn hockey exhibition. He'd assured them both it was all under control. Then, he'd gotten in touch with local artists about painting and sketch commissions.

And now it was the manager of the restaurant just down the street. Jay was a sweetie, about twenty years old and in their first managerial role ever. They were a bit of an anomaly here, even more so than Noah. Noah had liked them from the moment he first met them.

"Hey, Noah." From the way they said it, Noah knew they wanted to ask a favor.

"Hey. Join the line of requests," Noah teased, sitting up straight and gesturing for them to sit down.

"Actually, wanna come to the restaurant? I'll treat you to a drink and supper while I proposition you," Jay teased.

Noah laughed. The restaurant sometimes displayed art that the gallery had to sell after local exhibitions. It was a friendly working relationship, and he liked the sound of food and drink. "Sounds fair." It didn't take long for him to shut down his computer and close up his office.

"How's that hockey... league... going, then?"

"Oh, Jesus, I thought you were gonna ask about the hockey exhibit," Noah admitted in an undertone. Jay laughed. "The league's good, I think. Haven't had much time to think about it lately."

"I won't ask about the exhibit," Jay teased. "I saw both the ads in the

paper. Nicely done.”

Noah raised his eyebrow. “Did they run them next to each other?”

“You didn't buy a copy of the paper?”

“Oh, I was a bit jaded,” Noah admitted. “I figured they'd make it sound boring.”

“Come prepared to discuss symbolism at seven-thirty?” Jay grinned. “Yeah, that does sound a bit boring. Nah, both the write-ups were pretty good.”

Noah ordered his usual without even thinking about it as they reached the restaurant bar. “So,” Noah said, straightening up and turning on his stool once he had his cherry cocktail. “Hit me with it.”

“We're planning this... charity event.”

A smile tugged at Noah's lips. “Uh huh?”

“We've already got someone running it, don't worry. One of my good friends is the manager. But we need someone to help us source art and liaise with local artists. Since I took over, I haven't been in touch with a lot of the older painters. I only know the hip young zine-makers...”

Noah nodded. “Are we talking donations?”

“Maybe. We have a small budget. We're splitting the proceeds – a token artist's fee for each painting sold, with most of the proceeds to charity.”

“They'll donate all the profits,” Noah told Jay with a shake of his head, sipping his drink. “That's not a problem. If the charity's good.”

“A new local homelessness initiative. We're fundraising over the summer, hoping to get a fund accumulated before the winter. Last winter was...”

“Nasty,” Noah agreed, the corners of his lips falling. That *had* been a rough winter. “That's a good idea. It's a proper charity? Registered?”

“Yes.”

“Then that shouldn't be a problem. We can do tax rebates, but even without that, they'll do it for good exposure. It has to be good, though. A brochure with addresses to everyone's website and portfolio is a start.”

“Does that help a lot?”

“Oh, yeah. Our statistics tell us sixty percent of art buyers we track end up buying more artwork in that style. Twenty percent look for that artist again.”

Jay blinked a few times. “Oh. That's – that's precise.”

Noah grinned as his food arrived. “It's my job.” As he ate, he delved into the details, making sure Jay had a good idea what to expect from the exhibition.

By the time he was on his way home, Noah's heart was light. In the five months since moving here, he hadn't felt like he'd made many friends who appreciated who he was. The hockey guys were great, but so straight. Jay had always been friendly, though. With the possibility of dating Cameron, things were looking up.

Even the light misty rain couldn't dampen Noah's spirits. He threw back his hood to let it cool his face as he strode home.

Cameron

"Hello? Is this Cameron Riley?"

From the moment Cameron answered his cellphone, he was suspicious. The man's voice sounded even and crisp, just like a reporter or a telemarketer. There was something not quite right. "It is," Cam agreed.

"This is Lyle Newman from the..."

*Oh, no. The journalists have a hold of me. How the fuck did he get my number?*

"...I have a few questions. First of all--"

*It's a pressure tactic. You don't have to say yes.* Cameron went over his media training again. "What's the question?"

"Your absence is noticeable on the ice. Everyone's wondering: are you joining another team instead of Toronto?"

"You should talk to Coach Walker about this. I'm not sure how you got my number, but I won't have much insight for you." Coach Walker was great at stonewalling. Cam's announcement would happen once the team's season officially ended.

"We're more interested in getting the whole story from you."

"Sorry, I can't help you with your story."

"What do you think of your team's chance of success on Thursday given your absence? We all know you're the star--"

"Call Coach Walker. He'll let me know if he wants me to set up an interview." Cameron hung up on him.

"Journalists?" Jackson asked from the kitchen and Cameron sighed.

"Yeah."

"That was quick. Do they usually bug you?"

"No. I don't know how they found me or why they're calling," Cameron admitted. "Coach Walker will shut them down though. What

are your plans today? It's the big day... they have to get back to us by five," he added.

"Yeah. I'm thinking they'll wait as long as they can. I'm going to the workshop until lunch and then I'll head back here and wait around with you. Poor Thomas, having to go to work," Jackson laughed.

Cameron shook his head. "At least he should be off by the time we find out. Well, what is it, three-thirty?"

"Yeah, he took the early shift today to be home by four. And he's discussing the transfer today, too..."

"Man, I hope that goes well." Cameron was full of restless energy. He wanted to be out moving, pumping his legs, lifting weights... doing *something* to fill his day.

"We should hear about it on his lunch break. At least, if it doesn't go well, we'll know. I'm assuming it'll take some time to set up if they accept it."

Cameron nodded. "You'd better get to work," he told Jackson. "I'll keep you company." He liked hanging around the metalworking shop. The atmosphere was intense: sparks flying, the forge roaring, his brother focusing on drawing out the right bits and hammering down the others.

"Oh, no. Nah, it's boring. Just boring work today. You take it easy today."

Maybe Jackson was on edge with nerves like Cam and didn't want to show it. He'd let him keep his dignity. It would be a long day, but he'd find some way to fill it. Make a to-do list of utilities to contact, stuff to pack and sell, maybe get a quote from U-Haul.

As Jackson left, Cameron's skin crawled with energy. He'd been off the ice and out of the gym for long enough that it was starting to get to him. This was going to be the worst part of his new phase of life: learning how *not* to push himself to his limits every day.

Considering the scale of the news he was waiting for via Jackson, today was going to be the hardest easy day he'd ever had.

---

"Dude, you're not gonna believe this."

As Jackson burst through the door, Cameron spilled the bag of chips

that had been under his arm. They crunched underfoot as he scrambled to his feet from Jackson's couch, his heart pounding.

There was a bit of dizziness, but he tried to breathe deeply and not let his anxiety rise. "We've got an answer? Why didn't you text me?" The disbelieving laugh that echoed from Jackson and the openness of his face told Cameron. "A yes from the realtor?"

Jackson strode forward to crush him in a hug. "Thomas called five minutes before her. The transfer's approved. Before I hung up with Mom and Dad, the realtor called..."

"And?" They'd gone in a few thousand lower than the listed price, sensing a lack of competition. If it paid off, it would cover their closing costs. If not... they could have lost the houses. But not with the way Jackson was grinning. "Spit it out!"

"The offer's been approved."

Cameron's chest was tight, but he took a few more deep breaths and sank down to sit on the couch again. "No way."

"Yeah." Jackson sat next to him, making a face at the floor and spilled chips. He shifted his feet to avoid further crushing them into the carpet. "As soon as we sign the papers, the houses are all ours. One month closing like we asked for."

"Thomas is taking tomorrow off and driving out tonight to get the papers signed first thing and meet his new branch. The realtor's fine with that. The offer's been accepted, they can't back out now."

The room shifted around him and his fingers twitched. "Holy shit."

It was impossible to process the simultaneously crushing and thrilling reality of this change. He'd have the weight of a mortgage but freedom from his rent payments, the joys of seeing his family every week, maybe every day...

"Stay calm," Jackson added after a moment, realization flashing over his face. "Shit. I forgot. Sorry."

"I'm okay." He could still talk and breathe, after all.

"I forgot..."

Cameron was sharper than he meant as he answered, "I know." Then, he felt bad. *I can't become a cranky dick about this.* After a moment, he let out his breath and offered his brother a smile instead, then rose to his feet and hauled Jackson up to hug him.



Jackson laughed his surprise, then clapped Cameron's back and hugged him hard. "Let's call Thomas." He pulled back, his arm still around Cam's shoulders, and dialed Thomas's number. When Thomas picked up, he held his phone out at arms-length.

Several rings later, a grainy video feed popped into view: Thomas in the car, pulled over on the side of the road. "Hey, guys! Did you tell him?"

"Yeah!" Jackson exclaimed. "He nearly fainted."

"But I'm fine," Cameron added, shoving Jackson. "No thanks to you, asshole."

"Holy shit." Thomas laughed, disbelief and relief flooding his expression. "Careful, man. I told you not to stress him out."

"I forgot!" Jackson defended himself. "But holy shit, can you believe it?"

"Are you on your way here?"

"I'm stopping by home first," Thomas told him. "Then I'll drive straight out. I'll get there..." He rubbed his face and glanced off-screen. "Around ten? Depends where I stop for food."

"Too late for our celebration dinner with Mom and Dad. They'll stay up, but restaurants will be closed by then..." Cameron frowned, counting the hours on his fingers. "If you made it by nine-thirty..."

"No, don't worry about it," Thomas waved a hand. The camera wobbled as he shifted the phone. "Go celebrate and I'll join in tomorrow, huh?"

The atmosphere around the dinner table that evening was bittersweet, though. It was ironic that they were making the move to be closer, yet Thomas couldn't celebrate it because he was too far away.

Cameron shook himself back to focusing on his dad's stories. *Soon, it'll all change.*

## Noah

In his last guided tour on Wednesday, Noah was hardly focused. It was a group of older retired folks, tourists, and two university students and he was showing them the exhibit on the cod moratorium in Newfoundland.

Nobody took much note of the photograph that was *his* favorite – an old black-and-white photo taken in the 90s. Two fishermen were leaning across the edges of their boats. One man braced his chapped, rough hands on the edge of his boat, watching and worrying. The other twisted the net away to reveal the bright, wide eyes of a scarce few small cod caught in the huge net.

After the tour, Noah came back to the photo to admire the details. Even in black and white, it was potent. Every time he saw it, he sensed the stress and the grief of the fishing life.

Before his life as a beekeeper, his uncle Bill had once spent his days fishing on a Newfoundland boat. Back in the late eighties, before Noah's birth, life had been good for him. He'd heard the story dozens of times: fish from shore to shore, good hauls, rough work that paid, and then less and less, and then the moratorium. Plants closing, docks shutting down, boats rotting, communities emptying out.

Bill had gotten sick of it and moved back to New Brunswick where Noah's dad's parents had lived briefly. He'd stumbled into beekeeping, and it was an industry that paid better each year.

It was the barest of connections between Noah and the piece, but it was enough that he stared at the men and wondered if his uncle would have known them. He'd only come to the art gallery a couple times, and never to this exhibit. He said it was too hard on him.

The gentle announcement from the front desk ushered visitors out. Noah snapped back to attention, a smile spreading across his face. Time to do a walk of the exhibit, answering questions while guiding visitors to the cloakroom.

And then... a shiver of anticipation ran down Noah's spine. Supper, a shower, and a date with the man who had been on his mind all day.

---

This time, Noah was the first to spot Cameron. The broad-shouldered man had a smooth way of walking, like he was gliding wherever he went. He had a certain graceful awareness of his body despite his broad, yet lean physicality. It was smoking hot.

“Hey,” Noah called out to get Cameron's attention as he crossed the street toward the wine bar.

Cameron's head snapped up as he scanned his field of vision in one swift motion. He quickly made eye contact with Noah. The lazy, easy smile made Noah tingle. Cam's full, narrow lips pursed in almost a heart shape before his face cracked into a winning smile.

It was so easy to smile along with him, and Noah did.

“Hi,” Cameron greeted as he joined Noah, reaching out to brush his hand down Noah's arm. Noah sizzled with pleasure.

“How are you? You made it,” Noah commented, then kicked himself for stating the obvious. “Uh, I'm glad.”

“I'm glad you did, too.”

Already, there was heat between them. Noah resisted the urge to sway into Cameron and give him a hello kiss. “Come on in,” he invited and waved at the wine bar. “Wine and cheese?”

“Great plan,” Cameron agreed. “I have to warn you, I don't know a lot about wine. I usually go for beer.”

“Tonight will be your education, then,” Noah teased and winked. He knew that could be taken multiple ways.

Cameron caught on. His voice was sultry as he leaned in behind Noah to open the door for him. He murmured right into his ear, “I like being taught new things.”

His breath on Noah's neck was warm. The quick brush of Cameron's front against Noah's ass, plus the innuendo... it all raced straight to Noah's cock. He knew he was blushing as he gave Cameron a quick wink, then headed into the restaurant. *He's gonna kill me before we even get to bed. Argh...* “Table for two, please.”

Once they were seated with the wine and cheese menu, Noah dared to make eye contact again. Even then, Cameron was gazing right at him with those smoldering eyes. “Fuck,” Noah laughed under his breath, glancing back down to his menu.

“Sorry,” Cameron apologized with another easy laugh, but he didn't sound apologetic. “You're just handsome today. Again.”

“Thanks.” Noah wore a tank top under a black pull-over cardigan with intricate crochet patterns. It was almost lacy with holes across his shoulders but a solid front and back. The tank top shoulders were perfectly hidden under a solid section around his neck, which made it look like he was shirtless. It was one of his favorite outfits for that very reason. The thin sweater fabric clung to his body, and his jeans were tight and black. He'd caught Cameron having a quick glance already.

Cameron looked good: a light blue collared shirt with the top few buttons undone and a zip-up black sweater with pressed trousers. Noah approved of the effort he'd put into it, even if he itched to try a few brighter colors on him. Cameron definitely pulled them off. His hair was short and looked touchable the way it was brushed neatly back.

The waiter came to collect their drink order before Noah got himself into trouble by leaning across the table to indulge his desire to touch.

“So, how's the hockey exhibition going?” Cameron asked once Noah had chosen their glasses of wine and a matching cheese plate. “Not to stress you out or anything...”

Noah laughed. “Oh, things were hairy for a bit, but it's gonna be good. There's a few custom pieces I'm excited about, and I think all the loans I wanted are solid. I'm commissioning several more to appease people who don't think it's local enough. Then everyone should be happy. Please, God,” he mock-prayed, rolling his eyes and flourishing with a hand.

Cameron laughed. “It sounds like it'll be good.”

“Which reminds me – did you want to come with me to the opening night? It's not for a while, of course, but...” Noah fidgeted with the menu against the table.

“Yeah.” Cameron reached across the table to press his hand over Noah's. His palm was broad, callused, wonderfully warm... “I'd like that.”

“You like hockey?” Noah asked, glancing down at their hands with a smile. He turned his palm over to touch each other's fingers. The first few dates were supposed to be full of unresolved chemistry, but he'd be happy to climb into bed with Cam tonight.

Cameron's fingertips hesitated where they rested on his palm, close to the gaps between his fingers. Then, he trailed his fingers down into those gaps, lacing their hands together. "Yes."

"Well, I've got a ball hockey league... it's only casual. I'm sort of the co-organizer. We're doing an intercity game with some other guys we know running casual clubs this summer."

For the first time, Cameron's confidence turned into a nervous expression as his lips pinched together.

*Does he get performance anxiety?* Noah tried not to giggle at the thought. "Hey, you don't have to... but it wouldn't be a big deal. We're casual. We all go out for beer afterward, win or lose. And you'd get some new buddies out of it..."

Still, Cameron hesitated, his gaze rising to pierce Noah's again. Those dark eyes pinned Noah to the spot, but long seconds later, Cameron smiled. "Sure. As long as they're as low-key as you promise. I could use buddies out here. But if it's at all stressful, I can't do it. I don't want it to be a big deal, you know?"

"Yeah, you've got enough on the go," Noah nodded. "It's not, I promise. Just a bit of running around and sweating. We did it briefly over the winter indoors, but then we got kicked out of the arena."

"That's a shame."

"Yeah," Noah nodded, sliding his fingers out from between Cameron's to pick up his wine glass and sip. "Oh, hey... I told my uncle about you."

Cameron's eyes widened comically. "Which bit?"

"*Not* what an amazing kisser you are, don't worry." Noah gave a flirtatious smile to Cameron.

The tough guy's cheeks flushed, and he sat back and averted his gaze a little like he couldn't accept the compliment.

Noah laughed and added, "About being interested in helping him with carpentry or beekeeping."

"Oh. That's great. Thanks," Cameron nodded, glancing back at him and swirling his wine glass around. His eyes scrunched a little each time he sipped the glass of wine, like he was trying to get used to it. He ate cheese between each sip.

Noah tried not to laugh at Cameron's palate adjusting. "He wants to see you this weekend if you're back in time."

"I'll... barely be back," Cameron nodded, his shoulders sinking in relief. The stress from moments ago was gone, replaced with a hopeful glow. "But yeah, I'll be driving back before then. That'd be fantastic. I mean, the new mortgage will take time..."

"You guys got the houses? Oh, man, congratulations," Noah smiled. "You like them?"

"Yeah. They'll need a bit of work, but they're in decent shape already. Just gotta live with my brother until the deal closes."

Noah nodded, then reached out to choose a piece of blue cheese Cameron had been avoiding. "You should try this."

Cameron looked suspicious.

Noah leaned forward to pop it between Cameron's lips, and Cameron was so startled he parted his lips. Then, Cameron's eyes crinkled with amusement as he chewed.

When he hesitated, Noah held his breath, but Cameron kept going and swallowed. "Actually, that's not bad."

"Told you so," Noah teased. "I know a thing or two."

"I know... a different thing or two."

"Mm. I'd love to skill-share," Noah winked, letting his gaze flick down to Cameron's chest. It rippled with muscles under the collared shirt and Noah itched to see it.

Cameron licked his lower lip, then bit it as he gazed at Noah. After a moment, he nodded. "It can't hurt."

Noah hesitated, trying to read that response. "If it's too new for you--"

"No," Cameron said firmly. "I didn't want *you* thinking it was weird. I don't want you feeling like you're a rebound."

Noah sat back as he swirled his wine glass, then shook his head. "I dated someone in high school who was terrible for me. By the time we'd broken up, we'd... been broken up for months." Cameron looked relieved, his shoulders sinking as he nodded. "I get it."

"Oh. Great. Phew."

"A man of many words, all of them multi-syllabic," Noah pretended to swoon, finishing his glass of wine and the last piece of cheese from the tray.

"I'm sure you have some single-syllable words I'll find." Cameron said

it in a meaningful purr, his voice catching in a slight growl, and Noah lost his breath for a moment. "Shall I walk you home?"

"Please," Noah agreed. His breathing was heavy as he signaled the waiter to request the bill, but Cameron nabbed it. "No, you don't have to--"

"My pleasure, in exchange for the education I've already gotten on... *blue* cheese," Cameron answered, grinning at the waiter. "It was surprisingly good."

"Good on you for trying it," the waiter answered, swiping Cameron's credit card. "A lot of our first-time guests don't."

"I made him," Noah smirked. "It only looks gnarly. The gnarlier something looks, the better it tastes."

Cameron's head was still down as he watched the screen, but his head turned slightly toward Noah. He gave Noah a meaningful sideways glance.

Noah nearly burst out laughing. *No. Not in front of the waiter.*

The transaction went through swiftly, and less than a minute later they were out in the cold again. "You know," Noah shook his head, "you're a handful."

Cameron's rich laugh echoed down the street. He slid his arm around Noah's shoulders, keeping his hand carefully on Noah's other shoulder. Those extra few inches made it feel like Cameron was tucking him into his side as they walked down the street.

Noah didn't hesitate to slide his arm around Cameron's waist in response. As they waited for the "walk" signal, he leaned up to press a kiss against Cameron's lips.

*I could get used to this.*

---

The ten-minute walk to his apartment took fifteen at their slow pace, but pressing close to Cameron for an extra few minutes was nothing to complain about. Cameron was warm against him, warding off the spring chill. More than that, heat had been simmering under Noah's skin since they'd said hello.

Noah kept his arm around Cameron's waist as he led him up to the front door. He fumbled to hold open the screen door while unlocking

it.

Still close behind him, Cameron chuckled quietly and let his arm drop from around Noah's shoulders to hold it.

"Thanks."

As the door swung open, Noah stepped inside and kicked off his shoes. He toed them into the corner and stepped out of the way for Cameron to follow him inside. As Noah leaned in the living room doorway, he shrugged off his coat and hung it up, then waited for Cameron to slip his shoes and jacket off.

"You live by yourself?"

"Yep," Noah chuckled. "No awkward roommate moments ever again. Want something to drink?"

Cameron nodded. "A glass of water would be great," he agreed. As Noah led him to the kitchen through his cozy living room, Cameron followed. "Cute room."

Noah glowed with pride but tried to downplay it. "Oh, I've been slowly decorating it." In reality, he didn't have much more room for art. He'd chosen paintings proportionate to the space they took up, matched frames and furniture, and exploited thematic similarities. All in all, his living room was soothing, the dining room energetic, and the kitchen very simple. It just had one old hand-drawn map of Fredericton hanging behind glass.

Cameron paused to examine it, then came to lean next to the sink and checked his phone. Noah smiled to himself at the moment of distraction and the way his lashes dipped over his eyes.

When Noah offered it, Cameron took the glass of water, his lips downturned. Instead of sipping, he leaned in to press their lips together in a proper kiss. Warm, moist lips against his own made Noah shiver and turn his body into Cameron's. He fumbled to turn off the tap and avoid wasting water.

After a moment of probing his lips, making Noah melt with the slow deliberation of his moves, Cameron chuckled and pulled back. "Get yourself a drink, too," he murmured. "I don't want to keep you from proper hydration."

"Everything okay?" Noah asked, staying close for now.

Cameron's eyes flickered to the phone and his frown lines deepened. Something was definitely wrong, but it was probably too personal for



him to tell Noah.

“Just a friend... got bad news. Some friends, plural, actually,” Cameron answered, his thumb tapping across the phone keyboard.

“I'm sorry.”

Cam shook his head, then ducked it to type a text at blinding speed.

Noah swallowed and turned his attention to gulping a few sips of water, giving him a moment's privacy. Their tension was on pause but not killed.

When he looked back, Cam's phone was back in his pocket. The man leaning back against the counter was... fucking beautiful.

Cameron's back was to the counter, one foot propped up on a drawer handle. His trousers clung to strong thighs. His face tilted back, Cam slowly drank from the glass of water. His other hand was braced behind himself against the edge of the counter.

The evening light poured through the dining room window and struck him sideways. A sharp line of light skirted a slightly crooked nose and danced along the curves of his lips...

“I'd tell you to take a picture, but I'm enjoying it too much,” Cameron drawled. He'd finished his glass of water and was gazing at Noah with both heavy-lidded seduction and amusement.

Noah finished sipping from his glass and took Cameron's, placing both in the sink. Cameron stayed where he was, so Noah shifted to press up close to him against the counter.

Noah had been waiting for this moment, and it didn't disappoint. Warm, solid thighs pressed against his, their knees bumping. Their chests rose and fell against each other as Cameron leaned down and kissed him hard.

Now was no time for sweet.

Noah's body, already burning for contact, only ached more for the sensation of skin on skin. He cupped Cameron's cheek in his own, his thumb rubbing along Cameron's strong cheekbone to his hair as he pressed forward and demanded more.

Cameron's tongue slipped between his lips and played at the tip of his own, stealing Noah's breath. His cock hardened against his jeans, a distinctive firmness pressing into his hipbone too.

Noah ground slowly against Cam, slotting their thighs together to

press his cock harder into Cam's inner thigh. Cameron kissed like a fucking tease, slowly catching Noah's lower lip and sucking. He flicked his tongue along the flesh, let go, teased again, and turned his attention to his top lip...

Noah whimpered his protest under his breath, already seeing stars. He was fucking desperate now – desperate enough to rut against Cameron until the man carried him to bed. His stomach was taut with arousal while his chest heaved. He couldn't catch his breath. Cameron tantalized his lips and tongue, then moved his kisses around to his jaw and behind his ear.

Somehow, the fucker instinctively sought out the spot right below his ear. It made him physically jolt and moan again, much louder than before.

Then, Cameron chuckled and kissed it again, gentler this time, and Noah swatted him away. “Goddamn tease,” Noah breathed out. He rubbed a hand up along Cameron's chest and down again, under his hem, and his eyes widened.

Washboard abs rippled under his hand all the way up to unmistakably defined pecs. There was a faint, burning graze of shaved hair growing out on his chest.

Jesus, Cameron was hot.

Noah wasted no time unbuttoning his shirt, ducking his head to kiss at Cameron's neck. It was his turn to treat the man and get his mouth on every inch of this hot body. Noah wanted Cameron moaning and grunting and thrusting into his mouth with the same desperation he, too, felt.

He sucked on Cameron's neck, but not hard enough to leave a mark. As he finished fumbling to pull open the last few buttons, Noah shifted to kiss a slow trail along the smooth skin to his collarbone, then down to his chest.

Cameron had a few healing bruises. One was splashed across his chest, another near his hipbone.

Noah pulled back for a moment, quickly glancing up at Cameron. *That looked painful.*

“It's nothing,” Cameron assured him with a smile. “I play rough, that's all.”

Noah's fingers darted around the outside of the bruise as he ran his hand down to Cameron's waistband. “It won't hurt too much?”

"I grew up with two brothers," Cameron snorted. "You can slap it and I'll cope."

Noah burst out laughing. "I won't slap it."

Cameron winked. "Thanks."

Noah kissed Cameron's collarbone instead, his hand running down to cup the bulge in his trousers. Fuck, Cameron was big. A shaft strained at his underwear and trousers, and Noah was hungry to taste it. He wanted to see if something as big and gnarly did taste better.

"Mm," Cameron whispered.

Even this quiet sound of fulfillment was gorgeous, but Noah wanted it to be a cry of pleasure.

Noah licked at Cameron's nipples a few times and kissed his upper chest, then sank to his knees, pressing his lips hard against Cameron's stomach near his hipbones.

Cameron laughed and shifted on his feet with a sudden twitch as Noah kissed near his belly button. He raised a hand to cover his mouth, his body twitching.

By the third twitch, Noah's eyes gleamed with amusement. He trailed his lips back down to the waistband, licking that gorgeous line that disappeared into his trousers. He loved a man with a good V in his trousers. "Ticklish?"

"Maybe," Cameron admitted in a mumble, dropping his hand to Noah's shoulders. "Just when you go too light."

"I'll be firm," Noah promised, darting his tongue for badness and licking along the waistband.

"Jesus. When you're ready, of course."

Noah popped open the trouser button, and dragged down the zipper. He relished the sound, and Cameron's breath caught at the same moment.

Noah kissed a few more times near the center of the waistband as he hooked his fingertips into the garment. Once the trousers pooled on the floor around Cameron's ankles, Cam stepped out of them.

Cameron's hands brushed across Noah's sweater before he poked his finger through the sweater holes. He tickled Noah's shoulders and plucked at the garment.

“Patience,” Noah chided with a grin, but it was easier said than done even for him. His gaze fell to the bulge pressing at Cameron's tight briefs.

Poor guy. He'd take care of that.

Noah caught the opening in a finger and dragged it to the side, parting the fabric to tug out that cock.

*Oh, fuck, he's big.*

Noah licked his lips instinctively as the flushed red length bobbed free. The head was pinker than the rest, and the shaft was straight and thick. The foreskin gleamed with a drop of moisture.

His breathing was shallow as Noah curled his fingers around the smooth shaft, pulling the skin down as he went and then back up again. God, it was velvety and heavy, and... it just *looked* delicious.

He leaned in to press his lips to the side of Cameron's shaft, mouthing at it a little while he slid his hand down to cup Cameron's balls.

“Nnh, fuck,” Cameron whispered, his voice already hoarse.

Noah kissed the base of the shaft, then pressed open-mouthed kisses all the way up the thick length to the very tip before kneeling up straight. It was standing straight already, demanding more attention, and who was he to say no?

“You're fuckin' hot,” Cameron murmured.

“Pretty hot yourself, there, Cam,” Noah grinned. He gazed up the length of Cam's body, running the tip of his tongue around the head. The shaft gripped in his hand was about ready for anything.

Cam's hips twitched like he wanted to thrust but was keeping himself back against the counter. One hand wrapped around Noah's shoulder, the other around the edge of the counter as his nails dug in.

Noah closed his lips around the tip of Cam's cock, turning his gaze demurely down to the length he was sucking into his mouth an inch at a time. He shifted on his knees a little, getting closer to angle his head a bit further down and better take the length of it.

Fuck, he was salty and musky and... *manly*. The masculine taste and the velvety weight of Cam against his tongue made Noah shudder. He felt Cameron's eyes on him as he reached down to rub himself through his jeans.

He sucked slowly, dipping his head toward the base and back up again

a few times. Then, he set into a faster rhythm and closed his lips a little harder. All the way, he cast quick glances at Cameron now and then, letting him get better glimpses at the pink flesh sliding back and forth between his lips and the sultry expression in his eyes as he sucked Cameron's cock.

Cameron caught his breath a minute later and squeezed Noah's shoulder. "Get up."

That voice was a low command that Noah didn't hesitate to obey. He sucked one last time, bobbing his head all the way down until Cameron pressed at his throat. Then, he pulled his head back up and let the thick cock pop free.

He *really* hoped this meant what he thought.

"Where's your bedroom?"

Noah grinned. "Upstairs," he purred, pressing close and leaning in to press his lips to Cameron's jaw and neck a few times.

He expected Cameron's hands at his ass, but not those hands squeezing and pulling, hoisting him up into Cameron's arms.

Noah's eyes widened as he threw his arms around Cameron's shoulders. Cam crushed him to the counter and kissed him until he couldn't think straight.

His thought felt loud: *take me to bed*.

While moaning through the quick, fierce kisses and the demands of teeth and lips against his own, he managed to lift his legs. One at a time, he wrapped himself around Cameron's waist. Cameron was fucking *strong*. He didn't even feel a wobble as Cameron kept pushing close. His damp, hard, needy cock ground against Noah's stomach while Noah's throbbed in its tight trap.

"Take me to bed," Noah finally managed when Cameron came up for air and kissed his chin and neck. He rolled his head back, his whole body pulsing with need and pleasure. He *had* to be naked; he *had* to have that body blanketing him, pushing his legs up by his ears; he *had* to have that thick, swollen cock plunging deep into him.

He hadn't been this desperate in *years*. He was going to go fucking crazy without Cameron.

"With pleasure," Cameron whispered. Noah caught his breath and held tight as Cameron spun them and carried him – unwavering the whole way – around the corner and upstairs.

“Oh, Jesus,” Noah moaned as Cameron shouldered through his bedroom door. He was almost shaking with adrenaline after the flight of stairs. He'd felt safe in those strong arms the whole time, but he'd never had a man show off like *this* before. “You're fuckin' ripped.”

“I lift now and then,” Cameron teased. “You're the most fun of anything I've lifted, though.”

Noah's cheeks were flushed. Exhilaration raced through him as they tumbled onto the bed together. He untangled his legs from Cameron's, squirming his way up to the head of the bed.

Cameron followed him the whole time, crawling across him with the eyes of a predator and the body of a Greek god. He grabbed the bottom hem of Noah's sweater and yanked it up and over his head, then ran a hand slowly down across his tank top. His fingertips teased and grazed Noah's nipples. “Too many layers,” he teased.

“Two is too many?” Noah grinned, already reaching down to push off Cameron's shirt and leave him almost naked.

“Far too many.”

Noah arched off the bed to let Cameron pull off the plain white shirt.

Cameron leaned down to kiss Noah's chest just as he'd had done to him in the kitchen, and Noah squirmed into the bed. “Mmmph,” he whimpered, his thighs clenching as he almost held his breath. “Hnnh, I can't-- fuck, don't tease me anymore.”

“Sorry,” Cameron whispered across the moist nipple once he let go of it, but he still darted his head over to lick the other one.

“Fucker.”

Cameron laughed, his eyes bright as he knelt back enough to unbutton Noah's jeans. He worked swiftly to pull them down as Noah squirmed out of them.

“Ooh, naughty,” Cameron purred. Noah's bulge strained at his skimpy briefs. “And hot.”

“Sucking your cock was hot, what can I say? But you know what'll make me hotter?” Noah breathed out, kicking off his jeans and shivering as bare skin finally grazed his legs and stomach and chest. Every spot Cameron brushed with nothing remaining between them tingled and burned.

“I can take a wild guess,” Cameron whispered, and then he pulled down Noah's underwear.

Noah kicked it off as his cock bobbed free. The second it was free from pressure, despite the near-pain of confinement, it ached to be touched once again.

Cameron unthreaded himself from his underwear as he yanked that down, too, and twisted to kick it off. "Way too many layers. Too much work."

"Naked morning sex is the easiest," Noah murmured, winking at Cameron. "Just get it up and go..."

Cameron laughed and pressed their lips together again with such affection it made Noah blush. Then, he murmured, "You got condoms? My trousers being... downstairs..."

Noah laughed. "Bedside table," he promised. "And K-Y."

"Perfect," Cameron murmured, leaving him with one more teasing kiss by his ear before leaning over to search the bedside table drawer. Noah thanked his past self for having had the foresight to clean that out this morning.

Cameron knelt up between Noah's legs and Noah grabbed his knees to pull them up, his heart pounding with anticipation.

"You want me to fuck you?" Cameron grinned, twiddling a condom between his fingers while holding lube in the other hand.

"Only more than *anything else*," Noah moaned, and he knew that had been a lisp but he didn't give a fuck. Cameron found it cute.

Cameron's fingers were already slicked before Noah finished the sentence. By the time Noah had caught his breath, wet fingers pressed against his opening. Noah gave a full-body twitch, but the cool slickness rapidly warmed.

"I wonder how sensitive you are."

"Pretty fucking."

Cameron grinned. "This will be fun."

Penetration didn't come easy for the first few seconds, but then the fingers slid into him as a welcome relief from his craving. It wasn't what he was truly aching for, but it was a close second.

Noah caught his breath as Cameron crooked his fingers, slowly rubbing back and forth inside him until he found it. He squirmed, losing his breath even with the first few strokes of Cameron's fingers. Even two fingers were so thick it was a little *too* satisfying. "Oh, Jesus,

you don't wanna do that too much.”

Cameron laughed, leaning down again to kiss him. He was already sensually sliding his fingers in and out in a motion that Noah thrust his hips with. The bed creaked and Cameron whispered against his lips, “Maybe I do.”

“I'd rather you fucked me than let me blow my load before we even get started.” Noah wasn't shy about asking for what he wanted. The way Cameron's eyes widened and darkened made him shiver with pleasure. *That got him going.*

Cameron's cock had to be throbbing now. After Cameron pulled his fingers out and wiped them off, he rolled a condom on in one smooth swoop of his hand.

“Come on,” Noah whispered, pulling his legs even further up and apart until he was bent in two. Cameron draped his body across Noah's, pinning him down to the bed and tangling his left hand in Noah's hair while his right guided himself inside.

Noah clutched at Cameron's back. Firm, thick pressure pushed at the opening. Then, it pushed *past*, and slowly slid further and further in.

*Jesus, he's big!*

The more he slid in, the more Noah wanted of him until they were pressed together about as tight as they could manage.

And then, Cameron pulled back and thrust his body into Noah's, his cock riding up inside him like a fuckin' *animal*.

“Yes!” Noah grunted, not caring that his voice was sharp and loud. His body craved a hard, fast pace, and his orgasm was going to be blinding. “Enough teasing. Hard.”

Cameron obeyed, tangling his hand in Noah's hair as Noah moaned his approval. Cameron pulled Noah's head back and kissed along the exposed line of his throat. The cock inside him, rubbing hard against his prostate with each quick thrust, made his muscles pulse and flutter with pleasure.

He was so fucking turned on already – from dinner, making out in the kitchen, sucking Cameron's cock... It wouldn't be long, but it would be *incredible*.

“Tell me how you like it,” Cameron encouraged in a whisper, his voice dripping filthy hot in Noah's ear.

Noah's nerves sparked over and over again. He was dull to everything



except the cock in him, the hot body pressed up against him, the hand in his hair and the lips kissing up and down his neck and ear until he frantically squirmed into the duvet.

“Yes...! Oh, fuck, Cam, you're good. It's so fuckin' good. Hard and fast.”

“You're gorgeous,” Cam praised breathlessly. The bed creaked with each hard thrust of body into and across body. His skin shone with sweat as he focused completely on Noah's face like he was memorizing every moment of Noah's pleasure.

Noah closed his eyes but leaned up to invite a kiss on his lips again, and Cameron indulged.

As Cameron sucked on Noah's lips, Noah's legs dropped from between them. He spread them wide so Cameron better pressed against him. That gave fucking excellent friction between them as Noah's cock was squeezed tightly between their bodies.

“Jesus...! Cam!”

Now it wouldn't be long.

Cameron was already out of breath, but he kissed for all he was worth. Grunts and moans of pleasure were stifled against their lips.

Noah turned his face away for a moment just to force them to spill out into open air, and they sounded *incredible*. Every sharp, unrestrained sound between them made him clench tight with pleasure. Cameron's hips stuttered and breathing sped up. That spot deep in Noah's cock lit up with burning and swelling pleasure...

And then Noah was gone.

He lost himself to blackness for a moment. Every muscle drew tight and released in unpredictable patterns. His legs shook and he desperately rutted against those washboard abs.

Jesus Christ, he actually *felt* that most sensitive spot right on the underside of the head of his cock rub against the ridge of one of Cameron's abs! As he sprayed his pleasure across them both, he cried out Cameron's name.

Maybe a few curse words, too.

And “yes!”... several times.

Cameron's body slammed into his own as Cameron grunted, then caught his breath in quick, purposeful exhalations.

“N-Noah...!”

Holy shit. That was *hot*. Cam was coming inside him. Noah burned with the desire to be fucking *filled* and owned by this sex god who had landed in his town and his bed.

*I want to be his.*

His whole body pulsed and pounded with pleasure as Cameron gave a few last grunts, his hips shoving up against Noah.

Then, his body finally went limp and blanketed Noah's. They sprawled together, their stomachs both wet from Noah's pleasure as limbs tingled to life again and awareness crept back.

Noah already knew he didn't want Cam to go, but he probably had to. “You have to go?” he asked, pitching his voice up in a question and trying not to sound too desperate. “I mean, your friends...”

Cameron's eyes flickered closed for a moment before he reopened them. “Yeah. I'm sorry. I should... call a few people, you know?”

“No, it's okay,” Noah murmured, but he didn't move to get up yet. Cameron's cock slid out of him, and Noah lay back with a dopey little smile while Cameron peeled off the condom. “I had... so much fun. We're doing this again once you get back, right?” He smirked. “Well, you know, a date. Not necessarily *this*... but that too.”

Cameron smiled with relief, like he hadn't expected Noah to want him back in the house again. “Yeah! I mean, yeah, whenever we can. I'll be back pretty soon.”

Was he used to assholes? Probably. That ex didn't sound like a nice piece of work, and Noah just hoped Cam wasn't too bruised. But he seemed emotionally healthy on the whole.

“Good,” Noah murmured, reaching up to cup Cameron's cheek in his hand. He liked the burn of five-o'clock-shadow across his palm. “God, that was good.”

Cameron grinned. “My name's Cam,” he teased.

Noah laughed and patted his cheek in not quite a slap, but a teasing reprimand. “Oh, don't be that guy with the massive ego. Your dick doesn't need competition.”

Cameron's jaw dropped.

Noah burst out laughing at the expression on his face. “What? I tell it like it is.”

"You're..." Cameron trailed off, but he was laughing. "You can say that again. All of it."

Noah laughed again, making his fingers tingle. In fact, his whole body was still buzzing with pleasure. He could hardly get up, but he should see Cam out.

As Cam collected his clothing and put it on, Noah stole moments to glimpse until Cameron laughed and told him off for being a voyeur.

"Guilty," Noah grinned, watching him step into his jeans in the kitchen. "I can't help it. Hot guy in my house, I'm gonna fuckin' watch him all day."

"You don't have many contractors comin' over, do you?"

"Not anymore," Noah mock-seriously joked, pulling his lips down in an exaggerated frown. "The last one couldn't take the heat. I've been without a bedroom door since."

It looked like Cameron was about to go grab his tool box. "I can help. That's not ri-- Oh."

A delighted laugh escaped Noah's throat. Cameron had taken him seriously, and the guy was a fuckin' sweetheart. "You softie."

Cameron blushed. "Well, I know a thing or two, and... you're a trickster, you know?" he scolded, patting his pockets to make sure he had everything.

"Mmhmm."

Noah was still naked, so he stayed back as he followed Cameron to the front door. "Good luck moving out of Toronto."

Cameron turned to face him when he reached the front door, then beckoned him over to lean down for a simple, sweet kiss. It was just a brush of lips on lips, but Noah knew it meant more than any kiss up in the bedroom had. "Thank you," he murmured. "At least I've got a couple good things waiting..."

That last sentence had just a hint of an uptick at the end to make it a question, and Noah knew what it was. He nodded firmly at Cameron. "You do. A third date, and that's when you're supposed to get lucky... I mean, if you're straight. Maybe that's a rumor. I don't know how straight people work," he confessed.

Cameron was grinning affectionately. It made Noah's heart hurt to think about waiting days to see him again.

Their goodbye kiss was sweet this time before Cam let himself out. “See you soon,” Cam murmured, and that was a promise if Noah had ever heard one.

“Bye,” Noah smiled.

Once Noah locked the door, it was time to get to bed and let that pleasant buzz in his body lull him to sleep.

## Cameron

Cameron sighed as he stepped into his Toronto apartment. His legs were still woozy from turbulence. With a flight into the city center airport and no luggage, he'd made it here in record time, but somehow, it didn't feel like home.

The windows in this place were floor-to-ceiling along the lake side of the building. It was all hardwood and sleek design... and cold. The first time Nathan had walked in, he'd complimented the modern aesthetic while bending over the kitchen counter.

*Jesus. How could I forget?* He could still be around. "Nate?" Cameron called out, sighing with relief when he didn't get an answer.

When he rounded the corner to the kitchen, he found a set of keys on the counter. They sat on a note in Nathan's handwriting.

*Not again.*

"What do you have to say for yourself now?" Cameron muttered.

A glance around the place told him exactly what he'd done: the stupid antique chair Nathan had bought was gone, the lamps Nathan liked were gone, the cabinet was gone...

"Asshole." He glanced at the note.

*Dear Cam--*

*Can't handle this anymore. Like I said, it's all too childish. You look back at every guy who looks at you. I need something mature and if it's not one thing it's another with you. Last straw was the hospital for your "heart problem". You want my pity? You've got it. There's enough admirers to choose from in hospital I bet. Seek your attention there. Maybe they can help you grow enough balls to come out, properly.*

*Bye.*

*N.*

"What the fuck?"

Cameron bent over, bracing his elbows on the counter. He *knew*

Nathan was a manipulative bastard he shouldn't listen to, but Nathan had ripped off the gloves.

And it was so fucking *untrue*. Some of the other guys had girlfriends and a few were married. Others slept with every woman who smiled at them. That didn't mean shit about them as long as they were solid guys he'd trust his life with – and they were, every one of them.

Even when he and Nathan were off-again, Cam hadn't slept with every guy who offered. And if he had, so what? It wouldn't make him childish.

He straightened up and crumpled up the note, then shoved it into his jacket pocket. If he had to call the cops on Nate someday, this would be exhibit A.

"You're trash," Cameron muttered. "Okay. Boxes and the trailer rental." He grabbed his car keys, praying that dick hadn't fucked up his car. If he had... Cameron would make him pay.

---

Cameron's entire body ached by the time he finished shoving what Nathan hadn't taken into U-Haul boxes and loading up the trailer. Nathan hadn't scratched up his car, at least.

He'd sold his furniture on Kijiji for cheap, letting people in to buy and take away stuff while he packed. Box by box, he loaded up the trailer and the back of his SUV, thanking God he was a minimalist and Nathan a hoarder. Nathan must have worked for days to find every little fucking thing he could take. Cameron didn't care. It was worth the stuff to see him gone.

There was just enough room left at the top of the trailer for his mattress tomorrow morning. Moving it down single-handed would be a bitch, but he was too proud to ask his teammates for help. They were probably feeling worse than him after last night's loss. More boxes were loaded in the back of his SUV, including his box of trophies and awards.

"Oh, Jesus," he moaned once he collapsed on the mattress. He stared at the bedroom ceiling, then around at the dust patches. His apartment had been half-empty but still livable when he'd arrived just ten hours ago. Now, it was empty and dusty and echoed whenever he spoke or ripped the tape to seal a box. He couldn't even vacuum before he left: Nate had taken the fucking vacuum.

Cameron laughed at how goddamn weird this was – a breakup without any of the actual breaking up.

No time to dwell, though. He had to leave for the arena.

Having anticipated being sweaty and exhausted, Cam had kept out a box of shower supplies and a few changes of clothes. He scrubbed himself clean, dried off, and changed.

By the time he was en route, the U-Haul trailer safely underground, his stomach growled. His energy was back up again at the prospect of seeing everyone... and there was always pizza. And goodbyes for the guys who didn't make it to the party afterward.

Fuck. He *hated* goodbyes.

---

“Cam!”

“Cameron! Hey, Cam!”

“Hey, he's here! Bro! How you doin', bro?”

“Cam, the man, you're up on your feet.”

The sudden chorus of deep voices greeting Cameron as he walked through the side door of the arena made him almost jump back. “Jesus, guys!” he laughed, but he had no complaints as Fisher, Matty, and Chris almost barreled toward him.

These guys were the forwards from his line, and fuck, he'd missed them.

He grabbed each of them in a back-slapping hug as the others crowded around to ruffle his hair and slap his shoulder.

Lenses turned toward him, so Cameron smiled for them and waved, then turned his attention back to the guys.

“God, it's good to see you all again. I'm fuckin' sorry about last night.”

“No, man, we played a great game. Did you see?”

“I watched it on the plane this morning. Shit, when Freddy nailed that guy and he cross-checked--”

“--and the fuckin' ref didn't even blink!” Matty exclaimed, punching him in the shoulder. “I *still* can't believe that.”

“C'mon, guys.” That was Coach Walker's deep voice, and Cameron

smiled. The coach looked the same as ever, but perhaps a little more tired. "We've had the talk."

"Yeah, yeah, sorry." Chris was a rookie – it had been his first season, and Cam knew how much winning the Cup would have meant to him. The coach was right, though. It wasn't sportsmanlike to blame losing on the ref, and doing that would give them a bad name as a player and as a team.

Cam reached out to half-hug him. "You did great though. Two assists in one playoff game's not bad."

"They want you for a season-end interview," Coach Walker addressed him. "We just finished with twenty questions segments with Rich and Gus. Then we need to talk about your contract, if you're planning on leaving town tomorrow."

Cameron nodded sharply. "Yes, Coach." He jogged down into the locker room to pull on his team jersey.

God, this was going to be hard.

As the meshed material settled over his chest, Cameron took a moment to glance around at steel cubbies and broad benches.

This was the last time he'd walk out into the media pen and face the cameras. The last time he'd answer questions about his season's performance and what next year held. Next year, some other guy would get his locker and the team would move on without him. He'd been expecting that – but he'd also been expecting to step up.

*Don't dwell, he told himself. It'll only make it harder.*

"Cameron, over here." Mike, the assistant coach, was a godsend in the way he handled the media. He had his own ways of keeping them from getting too nosy.

"Hi," Cam grinned at him as he came up to clap Mike on the shoulder and mutually shake hands. Walker had only been coaching for two years, but he'd known Mike for a year longer. Mike had been there when he was signed straight out of university. Mike had always had his back, and no doubt their coach had told him not to let the journalists pressure him.

"Ready for your post-season interview?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

Mike nodded at the journalists, most of whom Cam already knew. "All right, guys, you can roll."



---

The hours flew by: press meetings, interviews, meetings with his agent and coach and manager to sort out his contract, and the actual locker clean-out. Cameron lost track of the number of times he said, “a medical condition” and assured the camera it wasn't a grave illness.

Officially, he wasn't retiring permanently. To the media, he was stepping back until a diagnosis and treatment plan were found. There was a possibility he'd come back, in other words. To him, unless there was a miracle surgery, he was done. He'd been told not to expect a miracle, so he didn't.

None of the guys gave him time to mope. He drove in convoy with the others, giving Matty and Fisher a ride to the mansion for their season-end party. Owned by a famous player, the house was a private place for them all to get trashed and see out the season.

Training camp would begin in three days' time for the lucky few. Tonight, they'd toast the guys leaving their ranks for next season's major league lineup.

Being knocked out in the first round of the playoffs wasn't a small achievement, but it wasn't something to crow about either. There'd be a lot of locker room discussions during training camp that summer. Coach Walker was going to be relentless.

Speaking of whom, the coach had gotten there first. He approached Cam to pull him aside. “Hey, kid. A word?”

“Of course.” Cameron followed the coach up the staircase to the landing overlooking the entrance hall. They both watched the guys pile inside, clapping each other's backs and handing out beers.

Coach Walker leaned against the railing. “You did good today, kid. Stuck to the party line.”

“What, about being on the injured roster and not the quitters?” Cam answered, his jaw twitching as he cut a quick glance across the empty space over the front hall.

“Kid...”

“Sorry, Coach,” Cam added with a jerky nod, sipping his plastic cup. “I'm not begging for sympathy. It's just... weird to wrap my head 'round.”

“I know you're not. There's something you should know. Are you moving back to Fredericton?” Coach Walker knew all his guys – where

they got their start, who mattered to them, what they dreamed about. Definitely where they were from.

“Yeah.”

“There's talks about a team forming in New Brunswick again.”

Cam snorted. Hell would freeze over first. There hadn't been a professional team there for a decade. The province had cycled through half a dozen teams in the eighties and nineties and thousands. None lasted more than a few years before getting bought out and moved to another city.

“No, Cam. For real this time.”

Cameron's eyebrows shot up. “...Oh.”

“There's a few teams talking about it. Montreal. Florida.”

“No shit.” Cameron straightened up, his mind spinning. They'd be looking for some big names to sign for the first season.

*Fuck. No.*

“They're gonna want you, and they won't take no for an answer. No matter who winds up buying the franchise and moving it there – and that is happening this time.”

Cameron rubbed a hand over his face. “If they can get some miracle surgery... but otherwise, no.”

“Even we couldn't get anyone to do it, Cam, and believe me, I *tried*. But they think you're being secretly groomed for success, some star player a team can pull out of its sleeve in September.”

“Shit,” Cam muttered. “I just wanted to get out of this.”

Coach Walker half-smiled. “Did you? Have you been planning your next time on the ice yet? Or concrete?”

“No,” Cameron defended himself, then winced. *I **did** agree to play on Noah's team. Shit.* “Not professionally.”

“Be careful,” Coach Walker murmured, reaching out to squeeze Cam's arm. “You've got talent to flush out anyone's roster, and you're hungry to play. It'll get worse. Stay off your skates. Heart problems are *not* something you wanna fuck around about.” It was rare for him to curse – even while coaching – and it made Cam stand up and pay attention.

“I'll be careful,” Cam promised. “Nothing stressful. I just bought a house out there anyway.” *And Noah... I want to give Noah a chance.*

“All the more reason they'll want you. They'll say you can stick around home while you play. Best of both worlds. That's not something I could ever have offered, but...”

“No, I was happy here,” Cam defended the coach with a firm shake of his head. “Am.” His shoulders were heavy with the knowledge that he had to go tell his buddies he was done. “But I'll move on.”

“Give it a year or two off skates, without flying and busing all over the damn continent and barely seeing home. You might find something else to keep you home.” Coach Walker was watching him like he read Cam's mind. Cam's cheeks flushed as he glanced out over the railing again.

“Anyway, kid, the night's short. Go tell 'em what you gotta tell 'em.”

Cam reached out for a strong one-armed hug, clapping his coach's back. Coach Walker always had his back.

So did the guys down here. Now, to hope they'd take it all right.

His heart thudded dangerously by the time he reached the bottom of the stairs. There was no way he could put off the announcement all night and let the stress build up. He might end up fucking passing out *again*, and that would be the ultimate humiliation.

Everyone was here. No better time.

“Hey, guys.”

It was like they'd been waiting for the word. Conversations went quiet as his teammates and friends – dozens of guys who had run alongside, pushed up with, slapped pucks past, and slammed into him all season – turned to look at him.

Cam managed a smile. *Don't fuckin' cry*. “I'm, uh... I'm sick, you know that. Heart problem. They can't diagnose it.” There were murmurs of agreement. “And I'm fuckin' sorry I couldn't be there yesterday, or the games before.”

They all protested – “No, man, you were sick,” and, “It's not your fault.”

Cam smiled and waved off the comments, but shook his head. “Let me get through this without fuckin' embarrassing myself, already,” he laughed.

After a quiet murmur of laughter, silence fell.

“I lied to the papers. It's not temporary. I, uh, packed up my place

today.”

“No way. The docs can't help you?” That was Matty, and he was shouldering his way past Chris and Gustav and Heinrich to get to him. He was... crushed. Everyone else barely breathed.

Cameron cleared his throat and shook his head. “Gotta wait in line with the rest of the public. I might as well do that in New Brunswick, back home.”

“What about the team--”

“No specialists felt confident in taking him on as a risk.” That was Coach Walker. “We tried. A... sister team... was willing to help.”

Coach Walker was trying to spare his feelings, but everyone knew who he meant. *They were going to make me an offer.*

Cameron bit his lip hard for a moment, then shook his head, pretending he was just talking to Matty and Chris and Fisher. “So I'm out, and I don't think I'll get back.”

“I'm a decade older than you and I'm here,” Fisher told him with a frown, reaching out to slap his back. “Never say never.”

Cameron shook his head. “Then I won't say never. Just... not for the next couple seasons. Best case scenario, I see a doctor in a couple months, get surgery around November. And I can't properly train until then. All I can do is pickup games, you know?”

There was a world of difference between a basement gym and what Coach Walker would have had him doing this summer. “Then I spend a year catching up to where I am now. After that point, who knows? If they'll have me back, if I'm safe to play...”

Coach Walker was watching him hard.

“They can't even guarantee I won't have a heart attack at home in bed, let alone on the ice. I don't think it'll happen. But if it did... it'd be an honor to play with you guys again. I mean that.”

Matty silently hugged him while someone else reached out to crush his shoulder and tug him back and forth a little. His friends stepped forward to surround him while the others came up to punch his shoulder or shake his hands.

Cameron waved a hand after a minute of this. “Get the fuck off me, I'm gonna spend the summer lying around doing nothing. You guys deserve the party. Someone put the music on,” he ordered them with a laugh, and that finally broke the tension.

Laughter, music, beer.

A couple more beers for good measure as the hours passed.

His buddies, always there near him, recounting his best moments like he was the guest of honor.

The announcements of who got pulled over to the big league roster. Matty was one of them. He clapped harder than anyone for Matty and crushed Matty in a hug. Matty fucking deserved it. He'd been working his ass off all season and in the games Cam was off, he'd caught up in points.

He let his body metabolize the drinks he'd already had so he could drive.

They managed to give Coach Walker a round of applause and a toast before he escaped.

Music, laughter, the pool opening up, the greatest hits of team video highlights from the year playing on the big-screen above the pool. A fair number of manly tears hidden in the darkness outside. Girls arriving, more partying, louder laughter.

Time to go.

A sobriety test administered like it was a joke, and it made him smile. They did it to each other to be assholes, but because they cared, too. He walked the line just fine. He desperately wanted to drown his sorrows in beer like the rest of them, but he had to drive out early.

He couldn't get away without crushing hugs from Matty, Fisher, Chris, Gustav, K., Tom, – okay, this was getting fucking ridiculous. “I'm not dead, just two provinces over,” he teased them as he waved goodbye to everyone else. “I'm driving out early.”

“Don't you dare fuckin' disappear on us,” Matty warned him. “You're turning up for parties when and where we say.” The other guys laughed, but they agreed.

“Okay. Give me some notice and I'll be there,” Cam promised. He'd promise anything to these guys, and he intended to follow through. “And I'll be watching for you next season, superstar.”

Matty gave a bashful but pleased laugh and one of those broad sheepish grins. Just like last October, when he'd slapped the puck into Cam's fuckin' shoulder so hard it had bruised. Cam had nearly punched the grin off him, but they'd bonded afterward.

“Bye for now,” Cam said so his heart would stop thudding. The music

faded as he ducked out the door and his footsteps crunched down the path. He headed toward the driveway where cars were parked tight to each other.

The assholes. They'd painted a giant maple leaf in white silly string across the side of his car. He turned to the door and saw it open again, a bunch of shit-eating grins on their faces as they pointed his reactions out to each other, and someone hollered, "Show your pride!"

Cameron turned to them with a broad grin and gave them two middle fingers to another uproar of laughter. He collapsed into the driver's seat to drive himself back to the apartment. It was his final night there before he hit the road for New Brunswick.

He glanced in the rear view mirror at the guys clustered in the doorway. Matty was right there in the middle, holding up his beer bottle like a toast.

Cam swallowed hard and leaned on the horn to honk a few times before pulling out of the driveway for the quiet, late-night road.

What was he doing moving back home after one little setback like this?

He was regaining his blood family, but there were thirty guys in his hockey family he'd miss so hard. He'd probably cry like a bitch on the road tomorrow, or even tonight. If he did, he'd never tell a soul.

Noah

"If there's any room at all here, I could split the exhibit into two parts, and--"

Noah already knew what answer he was going to get, but he had to try.

--I could put the commissioned pieces and local themes there, and put the rental series here..."

"It's ambitious, but it won't work," Greg told him. His fellow curator was a bit of a hard-ass, but he was a realist as well. Noah needed that reality check right now.

The arena had come back and said it wanted to see the local commissioned pieces before it agreed to give him the full space. When he checked the contract, it had specified that they'd rent him "one half or more of the lobby space" with only a verbal agreement on it being the whole lobby.

"There's the Picasso in two weeks..."

"Oh, right," Noah groaned. Greg had been in charge of that, and Noah didn't envy him. Anything world-famous came with insurance up the yin-yang and thousands of people who came just because it was famous. Greg's job was to try to convince visitors to come see the other exhibits, too.

"It feels a bit like... ghettoization," Noah shook his head.

Greg blinked. "Hm?"

Sarah was quiet, but she watched him.

Noah bit his lip, not sure if he should share it. Greg and Sarah were fantastic to work with, but they couldn't change the museum layout. Didn't stop him wondering why the higher-ups had decided to accept a loan on the Picasso a month *after* his hockey exhibit was finalized.

*They're just humoring the queer doing the exhibit about hot butch men.*

Sarah reached out to squeeze Noah's arm. "You'll get a bit more say in things when you've been here long enough," she promised. "They

stopped stepping on my toes after the pottery thing went wrong last year, before you got here.”

“Oh?”

Sarah winced. “I’ll tell you about it later,” she promised.

“Oh, it was bad,” Greg murmured.

Noah nodded. “Sorry. All right. I’ll figure out how to make it work no matter what happens, I guess. They just *have* to like the local pieces. I gotta see Jackson and Chase soon...”

“I’d better get back out to the floor,” Greg told him. “My tour starts in ten minutes.”

“Right.” Noah waved him off, then rubbed his face. He still had stupid grant paperwork to fill out, too, but he was supposed to be circulating the second floor today. *Oh, God*. He hated the modern art exhibit, but it was Jaclyn’s pet project and she was off today.

*Suck it up*, he told himself. Nobody had to like all the art – they just had to know the history behind it. This was still a cushy job by comparison to many.

Noah’s date yesterday was still on his mind, but he tried to ignore it. For some reason, knowing that Cam expected to go with him to the opening night made the pressure far worse. He wanted everything to be perfect.

---

The day was long, and he hadn’t heard back from Cameron in hours. Noah expected that much, but it still made him sad not to have a comment or thought from Cam to tide him over. The unexpected text had been sweet, but since his response, radio silence.

The grad student exhibition was a big event. Noah tried to stay focused on socializing and helping the students feel comfortable presenting their work. Cam wasn’t even due back in town for a couple days, so he had no excuses for distraction.

He almost bumped into someone who’d been standing behind him to admire a painting. “Oh, sorry...”

The words trailed off on his lips. It was Russell. The asshole who’d asked Noah out to the bar last weekend and no-showed on him. In a way, Noah was grateful because he’d arranged for his first date with



Cam, but he was still pissed at Russell.

“Hey, Noah. I'm so glad I bumped into you.” Russell was dressed for work, his office swipe card dangling from his belt as he swished his wine glass in his hand.

He wasn't looking at Noah the way Cam did. His eyes were locked on Noah's instead, his hand on his hip in a standoffish way. “We should make up for the weekend. I ran late and you were gone by the time I got there, but I'm free this weekend.”

“Er, wait,” Noah shook his head. “Are you asking me out again?”

“Well, it's still the same date, just a different day,” Russell smiled.

*No. Fuck you.*

“You were at least forty minutes late, and you haven't been in touch since to apologize. I don't think you did just now, either.” Noah kept his voice soft and a pleasant smile on his face so they weren't overheard. “I assumed you weren't interested.”

“Oh, don't be so hard on yourself.”

Noah took a deep breath while counting to six, then let it hiss out through pursed lips, counting back down to zero. Then, he licked his lips and smiled again. “No, thank you.”

Russell looked confused and stopped swirling his wine. “No to what?”

“No to going out again.”

Then, that familiar ugly expression crossed Russell's face. He turned away, but not in time for Noah not to hear, “Bitter bitch,” under Russell's breath.

*I'm at work. I. Am. At. Work.* That was all that stopped Noah from following Russell and demanding he repeat that a little louder. *Let it go.*

If Cam were here, he'd have punched Russell.

True or not – Noah wasn't sure yet how Cam handled these situations – the thought made Noah smile. He wouldn't mind having a guy like Cam on his side... or on his arm.

By the time he was home in bed, Noah's energy was gone and he was praying that Friday was easier on him. He barely changed and washed up before crashing. Once he plugged his phone in to charge, he saw a text.

*Packed up the house, great party with my friends, driving back tomorrow.*

It was Cam.

Noah's heart sang. He unlocked his phone and locking the orientation while lying on his side to answer without sitting up. *Glad you had fun tonight. Are you in your place or a hotel?*

*Mine. They let me finish vacating by noon tmrw.*

*The 1st? Nice of them. All packed?*

*Everything but my mattress and tomorrows clothes.*

Noah knew that feeling. *Wow. Empty place feelings?*

*Lol. Yeah.*

Noah wondered how Cam was doing right now. Should he call? Nah... that might seem a bit stifling. They were only waiting for their third date. Instead, he texted, *Can't wait to see you but drive careful. Could be late ice.*

*Aww xx. Thank you. I will.*

Noah smiled. *You're welcome.* His eyes were getting heavy.

*How was work?*

*Long. Gotta get commission progress reports for the arena, long story. Also that asshole who stood me up showed up.*

*No way. Did you kick him out?*

Noah chuckled. *I'm not allowed unless they're abusive. But I turned him down & he stormed out.*

*Good job. I'm going to sleep now.*

Noah bit his lip, imagining what it would be like to snuggle up to Cam. Was he a furnace at night? He was a big, solid guy, so probably... He answered, *Sleep tight. Stay in touch tomorrow & text when you arrive.*

*Will do. Good night. Sleep well xo.*

The habit of adding kisses and hugs to his text was the cutest thing Noah could imagine, but he didn't want to embarrass Cam. He just sent back, *Xoxo.*

Sleep came fast, accompanied by the memory of Cameron's lips on his.

## Cameron

The road stretched before Cameron and Ontario became Quebec, the signs French, and the drivers angrier.

He kept his energy up by changing the radio station and trying to understand French talk radio. He'd skipped French class because he was an athlete, but whenever he was in Quebec he regretted it.

His drive had started at seven after a quick A&W run, and he was still tired despite it being just after one. He wasn't quite halfway home, but he'd gotten through the snarl of Montreal traffic. He kept a sharp eye out for diners. By the time Cameron spotted one, he was in Trois-Rivières and his stomach growled.

Mindful of his extra momentum with a trailer attached, he changed lanes and signaled to exit. He was already tingling with anticipation. He wanted a warm cup of coffee and something filling for lunch. Maybe not too filling, though... soup and bread? God, that sounded nice.

The highway had been bare and sandy, great conditions for this time of spring, all the way out here. Once he crossed into New Brunswick, all bets would be off. The province was too fuckin' broke to fill in their potholes.

Cam pulled in near the back of the parking lot with the larger vehicles. He took a look around at the wooded area and restrooms powered by solar panels. Sketchy. He wasn't out to get his dick sucked; he'd wait for a bathroom in the diner.

Once the trailer was backed up against the woods so tightly only a team of professional lifters could jack it, he hopped out of his truck and locked it up. Then, he strode for the diner to pursue his daydreams of coffee.

"Hello-bonjour."

"Afternoon," Cameron greeted the waitress who met him at the front of the diner. She guided him to a table near the window. There were a few couples and groups of friends, but mostly single guys – truckers and the likes. None of them were even hot enough to risk watching.

It was a good menu: simple, hearty road food, with the names of the dishes in English and French. The descriptions were only French, but “tomato soup” was self-explanatory. There was something about bread in the description, and he was pretty sure *beurre* was butter.

Did Noah know French? Growing up in Ottawa, there was as good a chance he did as Cameron. Maybe he'd been a French immersion kid. He seemed like the classy type. And was he working for the government, or was that a private art gallery? If it was a government job, he'd know it.

He smiled, pulling his phone out of his pocket as he waited for the waitress to bring coffee. He sent a quick text to Noah. '*In Trois*'-- He made a face at his phone and guessed.

*Trois Rivières.*

It didn't bother auto-correcting and he muttered under his breath, “Useless thing.” Before sending it, he added one more sentence.

*Hope your day is great :)*

He hesitated, then pressed send. The waitress delivered coffee first. Before he'd even finished the first cup, he had his soup with bread and butter. Her French accent was thick as she wished him “bon appetit” with a wink and bustled off to take care of another table.

She thought he was straight? Or was that a friendly wink because she'd guessed he wasn't? Either way, Cameron smiled to himself, glad for the human contact in his long day of road noise. His hands still vibrated a little from the wheel.

When he finished his soup, bread, and coffee, he left a couple bills for the meal and a tip. He went to use the restroom inside since it was cleaner than he guessed the one outside would be.

On his way back down the hallway toward the restaurant, a young guy with a shock of dyed-blue hair approached. Cam didn't even need to pay attention to his gaydar. Cam wanted to give him a smile of camaraderie, but the other guy kept his eyes down. He made a wide berth around him, his shoulders rising defensively.

*Oh, shit. I do come off straight.*

Cameron headed out of the restaurant, zipping up his jacket against the spring chill. He'd been planning to stick around and stretch his legs, but now he just wanted to drive.

It was weird: it wasn't like he was out to the world, but he wasn't

closeted, either. As he merged back onto the highway, Cameron wondered for the first time if everyone on his team *had* known.

Maybe Nathan was right. Maybe people hadn't known about them and he'd been accidentally inviting attention from others. Or was there something wrong with *him* that Nathan hadn't wanted to show him off? It had been a mutual decision not to discuss their relationship status...

Cameron turned up the music.

## Jackson

The moment a purr of an engine stopped outside his house, Jackson switched off the TV and jumped to his feet. He'd been waiting all evening, drinking a few beers and watching a Storage Wars marathon. That could only be the person he'd been waiting for: his little brother.

He pushed aside the curtains to glance out into the dark evening. Yep, Cameron's SUV was parked on the curb in front of the house, hitched to an orange and white trailer.

A grin spread over Jackson's face. He strode to the foyer and shoved on his shoes just in time to hear footsteps on the porch. He yanked open the front door before Cam knocked.

"Welcome home, little brother." He pulled open the screen door and stepped outside to hug him, then help him get his stuff inside.

Fuck, Cam looked exhausted. He had dark circles beneath his eyes, a shock of hair pushed up at the back of his head from the car headrest. It wasn't as bad as at the hospital, but it was a close second.

"Thanks," Cam chuckled, his voice hoarse. He cleared his throat. "Just gotta bring in a box from the car with the important shit. Everything else can wait. I'll load them inside... next week, while you're at work. I've got the rental 'til Monday."

"I'll get it," Jackson told him, walking down his driveway with Cam. "How was the drive?"

"Can't complain. Long, though. Remind me never to do that again."

Jackson laughed. He'd never driven straight through to Ontario before. He'd gone there with buddies now and then, and to Montreal, but they'd always taken turns driving. Cam must have had a real fire under his ass to take it all in one day like this.

"I can get the box," Cam grumbled. Jackson grabbed it from the SUV anyway while Cam slammed the back hatch and led the way back up to the step. "I hope you have beer. I could use one."

"Yeah, of course. I picked up a case yesterday."

“That's my brother,” Cameron approved.

Jackson laughed. He thought his brother had gone through his partying phase by now, but maybe not. In any case, there was reason to celebrate tonight. Speaking of which... “Did you have your season end party?”

Cameron winced and Jackson frowned, then kicked himself. Of course it would be touchy. “Yeah. Lively as always. Matty got picked.”

“Holy shit, no way.” Jackson had only met Matty a couple times, but the guy seemed decent. According to Cam, his agility was second to none, but he'd still scored fewer points that season than Cam. Which meant...

“They were gonna draft me,” Cam added, his voice carefully neutral.

Jackson didn't quite know what to say. He set the box down in his living room while Cam shut the door, then hauled Cam in for a tight hug.

Cam clapped his back a few times and squeezed Jackson before letting go and jutting his chin out. He threw his coat near the closet and kicked off his shoes while Jackson kicked his off, too. “Where's that beer?”

Jackson took the hint: don't mention the fucking team for a day or two. “Lemme grab them. Want anything to eat?”

“I'm starved. Something quick would be awesome.”

“A couple sandwiches?” Cam always had two. His appetite... well, he had to feed an athlete's body, like Jackson had to feed a blacksmith's muscles.

“Thanks, man.”

As Cam browsed his phone, Jackson put together two sandwiches just the way their mom had made them for school. Two slices of ham, thick slices of cheddar cheese, a slice of lettuce, and a slice of tomato. Extra mayo and butter on the bread. Cut into halves. Served with a cold beer. Well, that was a new addition.

He shoved them both onto a plate and handed them over as Cam put away his phone and wolfed them down.

Once Cam had eaten and finished half his beer, they moved back to crash on the living room couch. “So everything got packed up fine? Utilities canceled?”

“Yeah, I took care of most of that by phone,” Cam told him. “The landlord's walking through today and I'd better get most of my deposit back. I didn't wash the walls or anything.”

“You slob.” Jackson smirked and swigged his beer.

Cam groaned. “Get off my back,” he bantered, jabbing an elbow into Jackson's arm. “But yeah, it all went fine. Nate was already in to pick up his shit so I had half the work.”

“Oh... Good?”

“Yeah. I didn't have to look the prick in the eye.”

Jackson let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. Cam *was* over him, at last. “I worried about that.”

Cam nodded. “Don't. He's gone. I dunno how great New Brunswick will be for dating, but... I want to have a family of my own, and that was never gonna happen in Ontario with everything I had going on. Especially not with him.”

*Kids? Or just a husband?* Jackson watched his little brother with a smile. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. What about you?”

Jackson shifted, unsure how to answer. It wasn't like he wasn't interested in dating, but... things just came up. His art show project, staircase posts, snowstorms... He knew it was all excuses, but he hadn't met anyone who was worth getting over those excuses.

“I'm happy for now,” he finally answered. “I *do* wanna meet someone, but... it'd take someone to put up with me.”

“Yeah, it would,” Cam teased, finishing off his beer bottle and setting it aside on the coffee table.

Jackson kicked him. “You little brat.”

“Glad your little brother's home?” Cameron rose to his feet, eying the staircase up to the guest bedroom.

Jackson stood up, too, to gather up the empties in the living room. He gave Cam a sincere smile. “Very.”

Cam turned a little red and punched Jackson in the shoulder as he passed by. “Me too. I gotta crash. Night, man.”

“Night,” Jackson said, bringing the bottles to the kitchen to rinse out and slide into the case of empties.



He grimaced at Cam's coat on the floor and picked it up to at least hang it on the hooks that were *right there*... Living together wasn't easy, but his brother needed a place until the houses closed.

A crumpled piece of paper left on the floor caught his eye. He stooped down to pick it up, and though he hadn't meant to read it, he scanned it to see if it was his or Cam's.

The answer was clear: Cam's. He scanned the last line twice, not sure he'd read it correctly.

*Maybe they can help you grow enough balls to come out, properly.*

Jackson's jaw dropped. "That asshole," he whispered, the blood heating up in his veins. He wasn't one for fighting unless he had a good reason, but this was a *great* reason to kick the shit out of Nathan.

He had to fight to calm himself down, patting Cam's jacket down for a pocket to shove the note into.

The worst part was that he suspected Nathan might be in touch again, and Cam might not say no. Cam was the type to need someone around. Not for his ego, but because he got lonelier than even he knew.

His heart heavy, Jackson climbed the stairs for bed.

## Cameron

As the pillow rustled under his ear, Cameron groaned. It had to be no later than six-thirty.

Fuck his body's routine. He didn't *need* to wake up early... but once he opened his eyes, it was too late.

He rubbed a hand across his eyes to wipe the sleep away, then rolled out of bed. He crept downstairs and brought his box of essentials up to the guest bedroom. Once he found a t-shirt and jeans, he headed for the shower and changed into them, then dug out a hoodie for warmth.

The drive had exhausted him enough that he eyed the bed as he dressed, wondering if he could make a rare exception and climb back in.

*No... I've got somewhere to be.*

He glanced out the living room windows to make sure his SUV and trailer were still parked there. They were, of course. He was in his hometown, not Toronto, where they'd knock him over the head to unload the trailer behind his back.

After coffee, cereal, and peanut butter toast, Cam grabbed his phone and wallet and he was ready to go.

He even skipped the jacket that morning. The brisk early May air was refreshing, but as soon as the sun peeked over the tops of the trees that lined Jackson's street, he overheated. Sunshine on his face made him smile with anticipation for the summer ahead. Renovations, backyard barbecues, and more awaited.

He unzipped his hoodie, then caught his breath. It was one of his Toronto team shirts.

*Oh, crap. Noah better not notice it..*

It wasn't that he was hiding it, exactly. He just didn't want to get into a full explanation of all the shit of the last month. Even Jackson's question last night had made his gut twist. That little voice in the back of his mind shouted, *Come on, Riley, push through it. Don't be a coward. Why fear?*

Cameron turned his face toward the sun as he ambled. It didn't take long to smell the distinctive mix of cinnamon, samosas, and hot dogs that heralded the Saturday market. He smiled as he strolled through the light crowds of people with canvas totes full of veggies.

He tried to remember where Noah's uncle's honey stand was. It took him a while to work his way over until he spotted the yellow signs. An older man stood behind the stall, his hair up in a cowlick. He had wide brown eyes like Noah's. The similarities ended there, but it was enough to convince Cam that this was the right guy.

Unlike the last time he'd visited the market, it was quiet enough to approach the stall right away. "Hello, sir. Do you have a minute?"

The beekeeper seemed startled to be approached so directly. "Well, hello. I do." He scanned Cameron's face as if trying to place it.

"I'm Cameron. I met your nephew, Noah..."

"Oh, you're his Toronto boy! I'm Bill." The man's face warmed up immediately as he reached out to shake hands.

*His Toronto boy.* Cameron's heart lurched, but he tried to move past the excitement the phrase instilled. Noah had been talking about him. "Pleased to meet you."

"I understand you're interested in an apprenticeship this summer, and possibly carpentry?"

"Yes, sir. I'm just looking for any kind of work right now. I grew up here but I'm moving back to town, so I'm job-hunting, you could say."

Bill nodded. "You look strong enough to lift fifty pounds at a time."

Cameron bit back his amusement and licked his lips. Coach Walker would have laughed in his face. "Yes, sir."

"Oh, it's just Bill."

"I'll try to remember that. It's a hard habit to break," Cameron admitted. He "sir"-ed everyone from the ref to his coaches and the docs. It opened doors that even talent didn't.

Bill laughed. "Toronto fan, eh?"

Cameron glanced down at his shirt and smiled. There wasn't a good way to admit he was more than a fan... but shit, now he *was* just a fan. "Uh huh. You follow the minor leagues?"

"Oh, yes. Best way to spot talent."

*It's not like I'm hiding...*

“Any draft picks?”

“Um... I haven't decided yet,” Cameron admitted. Shit... if he knew the team that well, he might recognize him. He had to tell Noah before Bill did, but he was the failure who'd blown their best shot at the Cup in years. He hadn't even been on Twitter or any of the fan sites, too worried about what he might see there.

“Well, I'll be watching. Season's over for them, now, eh?”

“Yep.” Cameron offered another smile. “Shame.”

“It is. They had a great run. Anyway, how about dropping by tomorrow to help build some supers? We can talk more there and I can show you one of the yards.”

Cam wasn't sure what a super was, but if it would get him an in with Bill, he'd do it. “Of course. What's your address?” He pulled out his phone to take note of it.

“One p.m. work for you?”

“Yes, sir—Bill.” Cameron reached out to shake hands again. “It's a pleasure to meet you. I'll let you get to it,” he nodded at a couple people in his peripheral vision waiting for a chance to talk to Bill.

From hockey player to beekeeper: who the fuck made these kinds of life decisions? It definitely wasn't to get closer to Noah.

He smiled, taking out his phone to see if Noah had responded to his texts from last night.

Noah

"Yes, your group counts as a community group, so the rentals will be free for your intercity club games, provided no other sports groups need the space at the same time."

Noah rolled his head back with relief. "Oh, thank God. And thanks, Jason."

"But there's one catch. It's... not related to your club, actually. It's about--"

--the art exhibition," Noah finished at the same time as Jason. Oh, God. This thing was gonna kill him. "What's wrong now?"

"The specs you sent for the commissions were good. They're just looking for something a little less... informal."

Noah wracked his brain. He'd thought the proposal was amazing – a rough sketch of kids skating on the frozen-over river. How much more Canadian and local could you get?

"Well, it's not like we have a local professional team anymore. Not even Moncton or Saint John. Closest one would be St. John's, right?"

"There's still a history. A lot of players here were drafted for pro teams – some kids have gone on to big things. That's what they're proud of."

Noah rubbed his face. "All right. So paintings of them? Are any of them on the board?"

"There's a few..."

*I knew it. The same guys who made their names two decades ago when hockey didn't even need helmets.* "Look," Noah said, keeping his voice calm. "How about the up-and-coming? Jo does good, fast work. She can paint a series based on a variety of local teams. And I still want to get the river painting. They'd all be in that same style."

"Okay. You go ahead with that," Jason agreed. "That should be good."

*Finally, a breakthrough.* Noah was itching to call Jo that instant, but he nodded. "I'll get to it," he promised and clapped Jason on the shoulder, then strode out of the office. He had a mission on his mind.

When he closed his hand around his phone, it vibrated and rang.

His first thought was, *Oh, crap. Cameron.*

Cam had sent him a sweet good night text last night. He'd found it that morning, but in his haste to meet with Jason and confirm the arena rental, he'd forgotten to answer.

The call wasn't Cam, though; it was his uncle. *Not another swarm.* "Hello?"

"Noah, hi. It's your uncle Bill."

Noah rolled his eyes but smiled, glancing down the street for the bus. Faster to walk. "I know. How can I help? Is it a swarm?"

"No, no. It's nothing like that. I just met your friend Cameron."

"Oh. All right." A little shiver ran down Noah's spine as he heard Cam's name aloud. He'd told Bill about a strong, honest, hard worker who needed a job. He'd also hinted that they might have gone out.

"How'd you like to come by tomorrow around one, help me build boxes with him? Don't worry, we won't make you do any heavy lifting. Your boy there looks like he can handle it."

"Ha ha," Noah groaned, but smirked to himself. Cameron *could* handle the heavy lifting. "Okay, I'll be there."

"All right. I gotta go. See you tomorrow, Noah."

Noah knew more than ever that he wanted to see Cameron without family around.

He texted Cam. *Welcome to town. I heard you're helping build stuff tomorrow :) I'll be there too. Wanna have dinner tonight?*

Before he got home, he had an answer. *Thanks :) Sorry, I can't. Already told my brother and parents we can have supper. You're invited too though if you want.*

Oh, God, he couldn't meet his family yet. He hardly knew Cameron, and they might have... expectations. Sure, there were expectations Noah wanted to fill, but...

*Maybe after another few dates? It feels weird to be introduced so early,* he answered.

Cameron responded, *OMG. Yeah that would be weird sorry. I'm getting ahead of us.*

Noah grinned. *Not that far ahead. ;) Date tomorrow after carpentry then?*  
*Sure :) Can't wait.*

*Me too. See you soon xx*, Noah texted back, his heart downright skipping a beat.

The answer made him blush. *xox. I was gonna one up you and respond with three xs but that might be getting ahead of us too.*

Noah licked his lips and answered, *xxx ;)*.

He got a single word back: *yum*.

Noah laughed as he fumbled to unlock his door. *You do taste great. ;) See you tomorrow.*

*I'm sure you do too. Soon... xxx.*

Noah tossed his phone on the side table and made a beeline for the bathroom. He'd much rather have Cam's mouth than his own hand, but he'd take what he could get for now.

## Cameron

Gravel crunched on the driveway as Cameron pulled into the driveway of Bill's house. He lived on a large property near the edge of town, along a winding road. When he hopped out of his car, the garage door opened and Cameron waved at Bill and Noah emerging from the building.

"Hi," Noah greeted, walking ahead of Bill to meet him. Already Noah's eyes fixed on him like he was the most interesting man in the world.

Cameron had to resist the urge to get flustered. *This is work*, he reminded himself. "Hi, Noah. Hi, Bill."

"Good to see you," Bill greeted, reaching out to shake hands while Noah stood by his side. "Come on in. I've got the pieces ready, so the assembly shouldn't take long. And I'll pay you for the day – this isn't an unpaid internship."

Noah laughed and looked at Cameron.

"No, that's fine. I'll get an idea what the work's like," Cameron told Bill.

"I'm paying you one way or another," Bill promised with a vaguely threatening grin. "What's your rate like?"

Cameron laughed. "I don't know the going rates around here." His agent would have killed him for that, but this was different. "I haven't done this kind of work in a long time."

"A hundred bucks? I guarantee I'd wind up paying college students to do this job otherwise."

Cameron nodded. "Okay. If it'll make you feel square."

"It will."

They shook hands again with mutual shoulder-claps.

Cameron noticed the way Noah's eyebrows raised slightly at the move. *Yeah, I speak straight man.*

"So, Noah can show you how the boxes are put together. Once they're



assembled and dried, I'm painting them on the driveway. I'm working on yesterday's built boxes right now out back."

"Great," Cam agreed, clapping his hands together. He'd worn a plaid work shirt over a plain gray t-shirt and jeans in anticipation of rough and dirty work.

Bill nodded and walked off to rows of square wooden boxes. Some were unpainted and others were glistening in wet, bright colors under the sun. The breeze caught the distinct smell of paint and wafted it past Cameron's nose and he coughed.

"Yeah, let's head into the garage. It's not much better there, though. Fuckin' glue."

Cameron laughed with surprise. "You've been sniffing glue?" he teased.

"Oh, I promise I haven't," Noah shivered, his expression serious.

Cameron reached out to squeeze Noah's arm and nodded. *Small towns like this, some kids do.* "So, show me these boxes."

It took just a few minutes to explain how the boxes worked. Wooden tabs slotted together when the pieces were placed into a rotating jig, glued, and stapled together. As soon as Cameron wrapped his mind around how the jig worked, he got it.

Noah took charge of handing over pieces, glue, and the air stapler as they worked out a system for working together on the boxes.

"Hope you're not getting paid in dinner tonight," Cameron teased once he had enough of a rhythm to risk distractions.

"Nope, my calendar is clear for you," Noah smiled back. "How was Toronto?"

Cameron laughed. "Shitty as always. Glad to be back."

"That was all your stuff moved out now?"

"Yep. I shouldn't have to go back, except when--" *When the heart specialist gets in touch. Shit.*

Noah quirked an eyebrow.

"--When I wanna visit, but that's unlikely," Cameron snorted, pretending to focus on turning the jig around. He reached for the air stapler and Noah handed it over.

Their skin brushed in a small electric jolt and Cameron shuddered.

Noah gasped just before the air stapler fired.

*Oh, crap.* This was only the first box of... fifty? Eighty? There were stacks of pieces everywhere. He couldn't get turned on yet.

Noah flinched so hard Cameron stopped before the second staple went in. "Loud, eh?"

"It just startles me," Noah laughed. "I'm fine."

Cameron smiled. "Want me to warn you?"

"Nah. I just assume whenever you're holding it, there's going to be bangs."

"Lots of bangs," Cameron teased, keeping his voice down.

Noah blushed and laughed, reaching out for the box once he loosened the jig and slid the box out. "Excellent. Yeah, this is a solid one. I'll stack them over here. So you said Toronto was okay?"

"Yeah, nothing eventful. Except saying goodbye to my buddies and packing up and selling all my furniture..."

"The rest of my week was boring compared to that," Noah laughed. "Uh, I'm getting approval for the full exhibition space as long as I make it as 'local' as possible," he air-quoted, rolling his eyes.

Cameron grimaced, squeezing glue into a line across the third board and sliding in the fourth. "That's ridiculous. Just being here makes it local."

"Oh, I've had those discussions," Noah laughed. "But I'm gonna get some commissions done – probably of the..." He trailed off as he handed over the air stapler and cringed.

Cameron reached out to squeeze Noah's shoulder as he pressed the tip to the wood and fired it twice, rotated it, and repeated. With each *bang*, Noah flinched. By the time he finished the fourth one, Cam figured Noah had lost his train of thought. "Commissions done?"

"Of the local hockey teams," Noah continued as if nothing had happened. "University teams, maybe our ball hockey team, local kids on the river, that kind of stuff."

Cameron saw a chance to distract Noah from his stress by asking more about the artist. That turned into a discussion of the exhibit in general. Noah was excited about several loans and the commissioned local pieces, but he talked more about the overall vision for the exhibit.

Box by box, Noah relaxed while Cameron got into the routine of light manual labor. He liked hammering boards into place, gluing, stapling, and pulling at the sides to make sure they didn't come apart. It was easy work.

Bill came to check on them a couple times as the stack of boxes grew, and he seemed impressed by their progress. For the most part, he let Cameron be once he saw the quality of his work, and Cameron's chest glowed with pride.

By the time they reached the bottom of the stack of pieces, Noah was getting restless. "Oh, thank God," Noah breathed out as he handed over the last few pieces. "This is it."

"That was it?"

Time had flown by with Noah's easy company and a little hard work. This was the kind of work Cameron would lose himself in for days.

"You wanna see the hives? This is the good bit," Noah promised with a grin.

Cameron's heart raced. He'd never been up close to a swarm of bees and had that end well. "Without protection? I don't think they like me."

Noah's lips quivered and Cameron's cheeks flushed. *Oh, you know what I mean.* Noah went on without commenting. "Yeah. They're gentle, I promise. It's wasps that are nasty bastards. And hornets, and pretty much everything else. Honeybees are a little tougher than bumblebees, but they don't sting unless you're threatening them."

"Can they smell fear?" Cameron rubbed his glue- and sawdust-covered palms together to try to clean them off a little.

"Nah. You'll live. Here, wash your hands first." Noah led him over to the industrial steel sink along the edge of the workshop, leaning over to turn on the water for him.

Cameron smiled, glanced behind to the door, then leaned in for a brief kiss. Noah's lips were soft and sweet, and Noah rose up onto his toes to press into the kiss.

When Noah pulled back, his eyes were wide and his lips were wet. He was so fucking kissable that Cameron had to resist the urge to do more than give one more peck on the lips.

Noah laughed at that little gesture and nudged him. "Come on, don't waste water."

Cameron scrubbed off his hands, doing his best to get the glue off with soap powder. When his palms and nails were finally clean and his hands were dry, Cameron asked where the hives were.

Noah answered by taking him by a newly-dried hand. The touch of Noah's palm against his own made Cameron shiver with delight. Noah led him out of the workshop toward the tarps where Bill painted the last few plain wooden boxes.

With drying boxes everywhere, Bill was the king of a miniature city, surrounded by skyscrapers in cheerful colors.

"Already done? Oh, lord. It's coming on five," Bill shook his head as he glanced at his wristwatch, holding his paintbrush. His eyes flickered down to their joined hands, but he didn't show any hint of surprise or disapproval. "That's nearly eighty in four hours. Great work." He seemed sincere, and Cameron smiled. "I left your money in the car," Bill nodded toward Cameron's SUV.

"It was nothing," Cameron assured Bill. "Really." He almost felt guilty taking the cash, but he knew his work would be rock-solid and it made Bill feel better.

"I'm taking him to see the hives you just unwrapped on the corner lot," Noah said.

"All right. Watch out, there's a nasty one by the back corner. I'm checking them next week to see if there are queen problems... once I unwrap the rest."

"Will do," Noah promised, raising a hand in a little wave. "Then we'll be off, unless you need anything else?"

"No, that's great for a day's work. Thanks again for coming by, Cameron. I'm gonna be busy building gear and unwrapping the rest of the hives for the next couple weeks. I should be all right for that on my own, but I'll need a lot of help checking on them once they're all opened up."

"Okay."

"Tell you what: I'll call you in a week or two to start work. We'll work out a pay rate once I call a couple apiaries and find out the going rates. It'll be eighty hours a week for the next couple months. Get settled in town while you can," Bill instructed Cameron. "You'll be shit beat soon."

Noah squeezed his hand and Cameron laughed. "Okay. Sounds fair, sir. Thanks for the heads-up."

“See you soon.”

“Good luck with them.” Noah led them down the driveway to the road where Cameron had parked, then beyond. “So, I guess I got the job.”

“I knew you would,” Noah grinned, squeezing his hand. He waited until they were halfway down the driveway before leaning up to peck Cameron’s lips.

The little playfulness between them was impossible to resist. Cameron gently hip-checked Noah, grinning when Noah smacked into his shoulder. He let Noah knock him off a straight course and feigned injury.

The corner lot was easy to identify: a bright yellow electric fence protecting painted boxes scattered around in clusters. “Is all this your uncle’s land?”

“Yep, he owns this whole farm. Well, it used to be a farm. He’s got it as an apiary now. That’s his house, a processing building, an old warehouse, and the garage for carpentry.”

“Nice,” Cameron whistled. “He’s doing all right, then.”

“Yeah. That’s why he needs help. I think it’s getting kinda overwhelming now that he has hundreds of hives. And he insists on running the market stand, too,” Noah clicked his tongue. “Stubborn.”

“I don’t know anyone who’s stubborn like that,” Cameron teased. Noah shoved him with his hip and Cameron, caught off-guard, nearly stumbled into a ditch. “Hey!”

Noah laughed and hauled him closer again, making sure he had his balance before letting go of his hand. “Sorry.” He strode ahead to the gate. Cameron’s nerves tingled at the fact that he was just inches away from the fence, reaching up to switch it off.

When Noah reached for the fence, Cameron flinched.

“Aha. City boy,” Noah teased, winking as he unhooked the gate. “I turned it off.”

“Still, I keep expecting... a shock,” Cameron laughed. “I’m not a city boy, shut up.”

“What part of Fredericton did you grow up in?”

“...The downtown part,” Cameron grumbled, rolling his head back for a moment. He couldn’t match Noah’s natural dramatic flair. “Fine.”

Noah laughed, then beckoned. "Come on. They won't sting. Probably. Don't act like a bear."

Cameron eyed Noah skeptically. "I'm built like a bear."

"Come on," Noah laughed. "You don't look like one."

"Thank God, I hate playoff beards," Cameron murmured under his breath. He walked through the long grass until he reached the fence.

Large dots flitted into and out of a couple dozen beehives. "Are the ones stacked up all the same hive, too?"

"Oh, boy. You *are* a rookie," Noah laughed. He took Cameron's hand. "Yeah. Normally, they are, but over the winter they can be stacked for warmth. There's about fifteen here. That's a lot for one place."

Cameron caught his breath as a small bee, just the size of his nail, dove for his head before diverting course with a buzz just past his ear. "Whoa." It was only Noah's grip on his hand that kept him from swatting at it.

"Don't worry. If they're going for you, you'll know it," Noah promised.

"That's... not as reassuring as you might think."

Noah laughed, approaching one pallet with a two-box-high hive. "Here, this one's a nice hive."

"How do you know that?"

"All the hives here are nice, except that back one. The yellow one."

"Is that why it's on its own pallet over there?" Cameron laughed, squinting at the hive in question. It was a good five feet away from any other hive.

Noah nodded. "And the other hives next to it didn't make it."

"Through the winter?" When Noah nodded, Cameron winced. "Ouch. That's gotta be hard."

"Uncle Bill takes it a bit harder than he lets on. The first few winters were roughest. Now he's more used to it, but... you know."

Cameron nodded, his gaze drawn back to the hive closest to him. He let go of Noah's hand and crouched a few feet away from the hive. There were lots of lumps in the grass under the hive entrance, and he squinted at them, then stared. "Shit, are those dead bees?"

"You thought they buried them?" Noah teased, but he squeezed

Cameron's shoulder as he stood next to him.

Cameron winced and glanced down, then shuddered, trying not to think about stepping on dead bees. "Harsh."

"Sorry," Noah chuckled gently. He leaned down to kiss the top of his head in an affectionate move that made Cameron's heart soar.

Cameron leaned his head against Noah, his temple touching Noah's thigh. He grew entranced by the little creatures swooping into the hive, crawling inside and back out again. "Are they gathering?"

"Something like that," Noah agreed. "Bringing back water, pollen, and nectar. Uncle Bill will tell you their life stages, but they all have jobs."

"How responsible," Cameron marveled with a light laugh. "I can... I think I can hear them." Noah was silent for a moment, and Cameron became certain of it: there was a low buzz coming from the hive. It was almost a deep purr of an engine. "Wow," he whispered.

Noah murmured, "Often on warm summer days, the whole yard hums."

Cameron's heart fluttered. Now that he was up close to them and they were ignoring him, his curiosity was overcoming him. Some flew to water buckets that were set up with rocks piled into them for places for them to sit. Others were flitting around looking for flowers, and every one seemed to know where it was going.

As he sidled closer to the hive entrance, he saw their fuzzy bodies and alert eyes watching him.

"Don't get closer," Noah warned with a quiet chuckle.

"Oh, *now* they're dangerous?"

Noah flicked the side of Cameron's head and Cameron laughed under his breath. "Spring's when they're most vulnerable. They get defensive."

"Coulda told me that earlier."

Noah reached down to cup Cameron's cheek. "You're doing fine."

God, that view up Noah's body was sexy. Cameron had been resisting touching or ogling him for hours now. It was hard now – especially when Noah stood beside Cameron, his groin right at face level.

Cameron reached behind Noah, his eye caught by something on the back of his thigh. "I think you have a bee..."

“Just brush her a little and she'll move,” Noah murmured, shivering at the touch.

Cameron brushed the insect away, and Noah's thigh twitched under his touch. “There she goes. She?”

“I'll explain later.” Noah gripped Cameron's arm to pull him to his feet, his gaze locked with Cameron's. “I think we should... get going.”

A smile spread across Cameron's lips. “I don't think I wanna get to second base in the middle of a bunch of angry spring bees...” He leaned in to kiss Noah again.

Noah laughed against Cameron's lips and pulled him in with a hand on each cheek, pressing up to him. “I missed you.”

“Even in those couple days?” Cameron teased, but he knew exactly what Noah meant. It was only Sunday and they'd slept together on Wednesday, but it felt like forever since Noah's hands had last caressed him.

And that goodbye kiss...

In mutual agreement, they walked together out of the yard, their hands hardly leaving each other. Noah kept stopping to press kisses to Cameron's lips. The heat built deep in his stomach and Cameron barely knew where he was going by the time they reached his car.

“Let me check you,” Noah murmured. His hands ghosted down Cameron's body, across his t-shirt and jeans. They wandered slowly down his thighs and around to his ass. Then, Cameron felt a sudden squeeze.

“That's not a bee sting,” Cameron teased.

Noah winked. “Turn around so I can make sure.”

Cameron shivered and turned on the spot, letting Noah's hands run down his back and sides. Noah sidled up to his back and whispered into his ear, “You're clear. Am I?”

Cameron had to fight to turn around in Noah's hold and inspect him quickly. “Yep.” He wasted no time climbing into the driver's seat.

Noah had him on edge. One touch of Noah's hand to his cheek, to his ass, to his back, and he couldn't fuckin' think straight. For better or for worse, Cameron didn't want to.



Cameron

“Christ, you're a good kisser.”

Cameron blushed, pausing in the foyer of Noah's house to give Noah one more lingering kiss. He'd driven home without incident, but Noah's hand on his thigh hadn't helped. “Thanks. I appreciate your feedback.”

Noah laughed. “Smart-ass, too.”

“You thought I had a smart ass when you stung it, didn't you?”

“Your brain's just as smart, but yeah.” Noah laughed as he pushed his way past Cameron.

Cameron winked. “Full of compliments today, aren't you? I wonder what you want from me?” he teased.

Noah smirked, looking Cameron up and down before shooting him a come-hither expression.

Cameron couldn't resist those narrowed eyes and sultry, pouting lips. He stepped out of the entrance into the living room, his hands going for Noah's waist. Cameron loved to pull him in and up for a good, deep kiss.

They didn't pull away this time even for breath. Cameron kept sucking on Noah's lips while Noah gasped for breath. When it was Cameron's turn to breathe deeply and ground himself, Noah pressed feather-light kisses along his jaw.

Cameron gasped as Noah tugged him by the wrist toward the staircase. “Oh, yes.”

Noah laughed against Cameron's lips. “I love how enthusiastic you are,” he whispered. “Catch me if you can.” He bolted up the stairs, taking them two at a time with a broad grin flashed over his shoulder.

*Oh, it's on.* Cameron sprang into action, thundering up after Noah. Noah didn't know he'd just challenged the best sprinter in camp.

He wrapped an arm around Noah's waist on the last stair to catch him and swing him around into his arms. Noah's feet nearly slipped off the

top stair, but his weight was secure in Cameron's arms. He grabbed Cam's shoulders hard nonetheless. "Oh!"

"Mine," Cameron teased with a wink. He pulled him into the master bedroom, Noah's hands running up along his chest.

Then, Noah pushed against his chest to knock him flat onto the bed. His feisty partner crawled over him, running his hands up his shoulders and over his cheeks. Noah's lips pressed against his and Cameron's gaze softened. He was so affectionate.

Cameron rolled them over in a swift motion, the bed sheets rustling under them and the mattress creaking. He grabbed Noah's waist to haul him up until his head rested on the pillows so he'd be a little more comfortable.

"Jesus, you must work out every day. You could bench me."

Cameron laughed. "Yeah. I do."

"That's the manhandling I was talkin' about." Noah leaned up to kiss Cameron's jaw and again just by his ear.

A shiver wracked Cameron's body as a line of heat burned straight down to the base of his cock. He was swelling in response to the touch, like there was a direct link. *Christ*. "And I was just saying last night how delicious I bet you are..."

He yanked Noah's t-shirt up and off in a swift motion. As he fumbled to pull off his own unbuttoned plaid shirt, he crushed their mouths together. Noah's hands came to his waist, each brush of skin on bare skin electrifying Cameron's nerves with pure physical chemistry. He'd never felt anything quite like it, and he was hooked.

Noah yanked off his t-shirt and Cameron closed his eyes as the neck caught on his nose. He tilted his head up, and then his torso was bare and Noah's eyes and hands were raking along it.

Noah's fingers pinched one of his nipples and twisted gently.

Cameron's whole body arched into Noah. "O-Oh, Christ..."

"Too hard?"

"No," Cameron whispered. The sting of white-hot pain melted into bone-deep pleasure that made his cock throb with desire.

Noah licked his fingertips, his tongue tip circling them in a way that made Cameron remember the warm wet of it against his cock. He reached out to tweak and pull at the other nipple, flicking his fingers

in a tease across it.

In response, Cameron ground against Noah, his cock painfully tight in his jeans and underwear. The friction helped, but he ached even more desperately to be bare, too. Every little tweak of his nipples built up the heat under his skin. When Noah leaned up to brace an elbow behind himself and close his mouth around one nipple, Cameron rolled his head back. "Ohhhh..."

Noah moaned, pinching the nub with his lips as his tongue drew rapid circles. Cameron was on edge, his breath coming in harsh pants. He rolled his hips forward against Noah's, noting the bulge that slotted against his own.

He only gave Noah a few seconds of this before pushing down on his chest to flatten him to the bed again. Cameron scooted down, pressing his lips to the middle of Noah's stomach. He licked a trail down to his waistband, unzipped his jeans and unbuttoned them, and pulled them off along with the underwear beneath.

As the last of Noah's clothes hit the floor, Cameron kissed up to his stomach and back down his thigh. He teased him with his lips in a straight line past curly hairs to the base of his cock.

"Nnh-- Nnh, Cam," Noah panted, his back already rippling and thighs twitching. "Yes, Jesus..."

"Mm?" Cameron licked a slow, wide stripe from the base of Noah's flushed cock to the tip. Along the way, he admired the veined length and beautiful blunt tip up close.

Noah drew in a sharp breath as Cameron's tongue tip lingered around the slit, then licked slowly around the head. "Please..."

Cameron wrapped his lips tightly around the velvety shaft and pulled them back across his teeth. He cupped the head with his tongue before letting it slide across to the back of his throat as he bobbed his head down. He took in the shaft in a smooth movement, his eyes flickering up in rapt fascination to Noah's face.

God, Noah was beautiful. His eyes were wide, his cheeks a cute pink, his teeth sparkling white as his lips opened for gulping breaths.

Cameron pulled his head back up with a quiet moan and sucked his cheeks in around the gorgeous cock. Then, he set into a slow, steady rhythm. Minutes passed with just breathy gasps, whimpers, and moans from Noah. Cameron's breathing was harsh, and he gave quiet moans around Noah's cock now and then.

“That's good,” Noah breathed out at last, and Cameron sucked his mouth off the wet, throbbing rod. Noah's arm was flung up above his head. His other hand reaching out to squeeze Cameron's shoulder and caress his hair. “Jesus.”

“You *do* taste excellent,” Cameron teased, just to see Noah's cheeks red with embarrassment.

“I'm... glad,” Noah managed with a quiet laugh, then squirmed over the bed to open the bedside drawer. “Need a condom again?”

“I brought my own, but I think *you'll* be wanting this...” Cameron leaned over Noah with a peck of his lips to grab the lubricant. Before he opened it, though, he settled back on his heels over Noah's stomach to unzip his own jeans.

“Oh, fuckin' finally,” Noah breathed out. Cameron laughed, letting his jeans drop to reveal his jock strap.

Noah's reaction was priceless: his jaw dropped, his gaze fixed on the bulging package. Cameron shifted onto one knee at a time to pull his jeans off leg by leg. When they were off, he fished out a condom from his wallet and tossed aside the garment.

Meanwhile, a soft kiss pressed to the stubble on the inside of his thigh where he trimmed a little to keep pinches and zipper mistakes to a minimum. By the time Cameron glanced down at Noah, both of Noah's hands were squeezing his ass. Noah pressed him down against him hard, forcing him to grind against Noah's hip.

Then, Noah reached between them to pull aside the jock strap so Cam's hard cock finally popped free from the cloth prison. Cameron gave a sigh of relief as the dull ache faded into pleasure, his stiff cock poking into Noah's thigh as he slid down between his legs.

“That's so fuckin' hot,” Noah whispered. “You have no idea.”

“I have a bunch of these.” Cameron's slick fingers pressed at his entrance and inside.

“Oh, the world is a better place now,” Noah groaned.

Noah was just fuckin' *fun* to finger. The way his back arched and lips parted into a quick “o” shape before he tried to exhale and calm himself... The way he moaned in little whimpers near the back of his throat... The way his cock stiffened and twitched further when Cameron rubbed his prostate...

Noah slapped Cameron's wrist after a minute. “Don't waste any more

time.”

“Foreplay is a dead art.” Cameron winked, slid his fingers free, and wiped them clean.

“Good.”

Cameron laughed, ripping open the condom package and rolling it down his shaft with a few skillful strokes.

Then, he was pressing against Noah. Noah's feet rose to his thighs and arms wrapped around his shoulders. Cameron sank into the tightness and intimacy of Noah, and he never wanted to leave.

As Noah enveloped him, Cameron let a quiet grunt of pleasure escape at the squeeze of his body. He pushed further and further in, until he couldn't go any more.

Noah pulled his hips back at the same moment as Cameron, then pushed up into him. His back flexed as he worked with Cameron to drive Cam good and deep into him. With each thrust, a small grunt or moan of pleasure escaped him, and Cameron marveled at how fucking vocal he was.

“Cam...!”

Noah was overwhelmed, so Cam leaned in to kiss him until he whimpered again.

Thrust by thrust, their bodies worked together. Deep intimacy thrummed through Cameron's bones. Cameron watched the pleasure work its way across Noah's face, and he loved it.

Noah pulled him in for a deep kiss, and Cameron knew the edge was close. He couldn't keep it slow anymore.

He grabbed Noah's hip and curled his fingers around it hard, pushing into the tight perfection of his body faster and deeper. Noah grunted, still pushing up into him, but his thighs were quivering against him. His stomach tensed each time Cameron thrust across that one spot inside.

Noah reached between them to stroke his cock. Cameron grunted, pushing his face into Noah's neck to kiss at his shoulder while keeping his breathing slow and steady.

The doctor's warnings still echoed in his mind: prolonged elevated heart rates or brief extra-elevated heart rates could be – no, *would* be dangerous for him.

But he couldn't fuckin' freeze this sex life. Not now that he'd found the most intimate moments of his life in this man's bed just a week after meeting him.

*Fuck. I fell hard.*

Still, Cameron grinned as he watched Noah's back arch and ripple, his hips push up... Then, his cock squirted out every drop of passion between their bodies. The extra clenching milked Cam's pleasure until he stumbled over the edge. He had barely enough time to gasp, "Noah...!" as his balls tightened.

Then Cameron was coming, too, plunging off the edge and clinging half-desperately to Noah like a life preserver. His heart pounded, his thighs quivered, his muscles drew tight and released in spasms of ecstasy...

Noah pulled him in to kiss him as soon as his cock slipped free. They shared a long, slow kiss or two against each other's lips before Cameron pulled back to breathe, still grinding their bodies together for the extra sparks of warmth.

"Christ," Cameron whispered.

Noah giggled, and the sound became a throaty chuckle, then a deep laugh. "Y-You're saying that a lot lately," he teased. "My name's Noah."

Cameron swatted Noah's thigh. "Get your own line."

"Sometimes, the classics work." Noah rubbed Cameron's back slowly as they cooled down together, limbs still tangled. He kept pressing sweet kisses to Cameron's lips, and then to his jaw and up to his temple and behind his ear – everywhere he could reach.

It was almost overstimulating, but Cameron liked it.

"I – I hate to be the one to bring this up, but... I don't want this to just be about sex," Cameron murmured. "You?"

Noah pulled back enough to lock eyes again. His expression was sincere as he nodded. "Me neither. But even if it were, I wouldn't care as long as you treat me well."

"Do I treat you well?"

Noah smiled. In answer, he leaned in to press a slow, aimless kiss against Cameron's lips, then sucked on Cam's lower lip. When Cameron could hardly breathe again, Noah murmured, "Damn near perfect."

Noah

“So, the date for the art show is August eleventh. Noah, will that give you enough time?”

Noah was distracted enough to need a nudge from Jay. August eleventh. It was the end of the summer, months away, but he knew something was happening that day. What the hell was it? It wasn't his exhibition, that was much sooner.

*Oh, Christ. The Moncton hockey game.* He'd just been to see Jason a couple days ago about getting the arena for the big intercity match – that was why it was stuck in his brain.

But he couldn't back out of Jay's art show for career, charity, and friendship reasons. Likewise, he couldn't back out of the hockey game. The guys were counting on him, weren't they?

“Er, no, that's okay,” Noah told them, rubbing his chin as he took out his phone. “The eleventh? What time?”

“Seven to ten-thirty.”

*The game's at seven, too. Oh, boy.*

Noah wished he were back in bed with that gorgeous, affectionate hunk. Somehow, his life had become complicated enough that he'd be letting people down any which way.

It wasn't life or death to attend the art show, but as the curator, he'd be practically required to be there. Likewise, as one of the leaders of the hockey club, he was supposed to be there, too. Then again, he wasn't the team captain – that was Kevin, an enthusiastic, young, yet experienced university player.

Something would have to give, and the match couldn't be rearranged; Moncton had already booked their bus.

Maybe he'd just run away with Cam that day... Except Cam was joining the team, too.

*Can he play in my stead?*

He tried to shake off the thoughts. He had all summer to figure this

one out.

---

“Behind you-- oh, Art!” Noah groaned as his friend completely missed the ball skidding along the pavement behind him. Ray hooked the ball around his blade and was off down the pavement.

They were the only three there yet, but as guys showed up, they joined in. The game began once they had enough to form teams.

“That your new friend?” Ray asked, pausing long enough to gesture with his stick toward the ball field entrance.

Noah glanced toward the gate, then nodded. “That’s Cam.” He hadn’t been specific about how he knew Cameron, just said another guy was interested in joining. He hoped Cameron wouldn’t be questioned any more than the other guys he’d recruited.

And he hoped Cameron was some good. They weren’t a serious club by any stretch of the imagination, but a few of the guys here were competitive.

“Hey, Cam,” Noah called out, jogging to the edge of the concrete pad and through the fence gate. “We always bring a couple extra sticks. We don’t have any other gear right now, but they want us to have some safety gear when we’re in the arena.”

“All right,” Cameron agreed easily. He was dressed in loose shorts and a t-shirt, both of which still managed to cling to his fuckin’ hot body.

Noah saw a few other guys approaching, so he offered Cam his choice of sticks and waited while Cam picked them up and eyed them. “I’ll introduce you to the rest of them.”

Cam chose one, squinting with one eye down the length of the stick and balancing it on a finger. It slipped sideways, but he caught it and hefted it, testing the weight. “Okay. This one. Thanks.”

He introduced each of the guys as they approached. It was easy since Cam bantered with them no problem and asked them about the club, giving Kevin the chance to brag a little. When Kevin mentioned the Moncton game, Cameron’s expression flickered and he nodded without commenting, then asked how many guys there were.

Noah kept his distance, letting them all bond a little before gesturing. “Come on, the day’s getting old.”



“Kevin – we got positions?” Cameron asked, glancing up and down the court to assess it. He sensed that Kevin was the captain, then.

Kevin nodded. “But we play in all of them. You better at anything?”

“Rotating, wow. Keep me on my toes. I'm used to forward... right-winger, if I can. Do we have that many players?”

“Depends who shows up,” Kevin told him and Cameron nodded.

Noah laughed under his breath. “You've played before, then.”

“Yeah, for a while,” Cameron answered, shaking out his shoulders. “Who's got the puck? Er, ball.”

As more guys showed up, they joined in, fleshing out the teams. Noah was thankful that Kevin put Cam on his team; while Cameron got the right-winger position he'd asked for, Noah took right defense. That gave him a great view of Cameron's muscled thighs and ass. Not just that, but the way his shirt pulled tight over his shoulder blades and his head moved as he kept watch on the ball and everyone else.

The way he ran was fluid, like he was expecting skates under his feet. Noah had to laugh a little – most kids in Canada had played ice hockey at some point, but ball hockey was different without the momentum of ice.

Cameron was *good*, too. Despite his casual attitude and laughter, he kept getting into focus. He was competitive, then, too. Noah jogged forward as Cameron pirouetted to avoid Ray's defense and turned left, looking for someone to pass to. With nobody there, he backed up a pace and Kevin snuck his stick in to steal the ball.

“Fu-- oh, you little,” Cameron grumbled as the guys laughed. He jogged backward while Noah had to shift his focus from Cameron's body to the game to try to challenge Kevin.

They didn't push themselves to the limit that day, leaving Noah the chance to look around sometimes and gauge who was there. Just about everyone had shown up, which was a great sign.

There was someone in the parking lot, too, watching them. Maybe someone waiting to use the court for their own practice... or someone who wanted to join in? He squinted, but he couldn't see much more than a guy sitting in the driver's seat.

A little creepy.

“Hey!” Cameron's sharp call snapped Noah out of it and he sprinted left to back up Jonathon.

“Over here!”

The second Noah caught the ball with his stick and turned to pass up the court to Cameron, Cameron was exactly where he needed him to be.

Cameron was watching him just as closely, anticipating his every need.

The thought made Noah shiver before he slapped the ball up to Cameron. Cameron rolled it down the blade to the back to spin it around Kevin's blade once, then twice. He hip-checked him out of the way and passed it.

Every contact Cameron made with a guy on the other team made Noah's jealousy flare up, even though he knew it was ridiculous. Cam was there for and with him.

When they called the game quits an hour later, Cameron was sweaty but breathing easier than the rest of them as he approached. “Cool.”

“You *do* work out a lot,” Noah complained. He was flushed with heat and resisting the urge to double up for breath. He leaned heavily on his stick instead. “Fuck your composure.”

Cameron laughed with shock and shoved Noah lightly. “Hey, don't hate. We won.”

“True.” Noah straightened up and wiped his forehead. “So you in for the game versus Moncton? You could be the secret weapon. You're pretty good.”

Amusement flashed through Cameron's expression, then a wary moment. “Maybe. I gotta... watch my back with this,” Cameron admitted, walking down the court to drop off his stick as Noah followed.

“Oh.” Noah had no idea what that meant. Cameron *had* been worried that it would be too serious. Maybe he had stress management issues. “Yeah, no problem. Nobody's forced to. Well, you know, me and Kevin and Rick – the guys who organize it – are... but other than that...”

Cameron flashed him a little smile. “We'll see.”

Noah remembered the guy he'd seen in the parking lot earlier and glanced up to scan the lot, but that car was gone now.

*Huh. Must have given up.*

Something niggled at the back of his mind, but he set it aside. “Going

out for beers with us?”

Cameron relaxed and clapped Noah's shoulder, rubbing with his thumb before letting go. “Hell, yeah.”

## Jackson

Jackson had to get away. He'd come home only to trip over Cam's shit in the front hall and then make them both supper. He and his friends were out for drinks at the local bar, and his temper was cooling off as fast as it heated up. Close quarters weren't easy for anyone.

As Jackson leaned back and told his friends about forging a hockey stick, there was Cam: walking by the window of the bar.

And Cam wasn't alone.

Of all the fuckin' people, he was with Noah, the art director of the very show Jackson's piece was appearing in.

The very openly gay Noah, who'd come here this winter with his lisp and tight clothes and an ever-bright smile.

It didn't take a brainiac to put two and two together.

*Crap. I guess that's why he hasn't been moving his boxes or tidying up.* Jackson's eyes followed them as they strode past the window.

Cameron brushed a hand down Noah's arm, and Noah was enraptured. A game smile lingered on his lips as he listened to whatever Cameron was saying. Noah laughed and bumped his shoulder against Cameron's to point up to the cocktail bar across the street.

They crossed the street hand-in-hand, jaywalking as Cameron boldly led them. Noah lingered reluctantly, making Cam tug his hand to get him to jog across the road.

Before Ashley and Ryan followed his gaze and outed Cam, Jackson hastily snapped back to the conversation.

Even in those ten seconds, that was more chemistry than he'd ever seen between Cam and Nathan. And Noah was sweet, from what he knew – maybe a little fussy, but sincere and honest. He knew his shit about art. He was a curator or director or something at the local gallery.

Jackson bit his lip and signaled the waitress for another round of beers. "My turn."

## Cameron

Cameron couldn't blame Jackson for his annoyance. Jackson was a bachelor used to living alone in a small house. Now he was boxed in by Cam's clutter and his own, and he'd always had a low tolerance for clutter.

That was just one of the reasons Cam looked forward to the houses closing. Also, besides having the biggest financial decision of his life hanging over him, he wanted a nice place to bring Noah.

He scanned the living room for messy spots, then tidied up a few of them. Once the place looked a little better, he hauled up a few storage tubs to the guest bedroom and found a spot to stack them.

"Good enough for now."

Something more urgent called him.

Cam shoved on his shoes, he fished his phone out of his pocket and dialed Noah's number. They'd parted ways after hockey and beer last night with a quiet kiss outside the bar. They hadn't been right within sight of Noah's buddies, but they weren't exactly hiding it, either.

"Hey, Noah. What's up tonight? Working?"

"No, I'm off. Why?"

"I'd like to see you."

"Sure. Wanna come over?"

"I was thinking I'd take you out for a cocktail..." Cameron trailed off with a meaningful smile. He moved his phone to his other ear and locked up Jackson's house. Jackson was long gone, probably to walk off his temper and have a drink.

"Oh," Noah murmured, and Cameron pictured the smile accompanying the surprised sound. "Yeah, that'd be great."

Cameron kept his voice down as he trotted down the steps to the sidewalk. "I mean, unless you *really* wanted to spend every date in your bed..."

“Cam!” Noah laughed. “Not that I'd say no. Okay, are you on your way over?”

“Mhmm. There in fifteen. Be ready to drink and dance,” Cam teased. “I'm assuming you like to dance.”

“I love to dance. See you.”

Cameron smiled, pocketing his phone again as he strode down the sidewalk with a mission in his step. He wanted to have Noah on his arm every night. It was becoming obvious that they had to talk about their relationship.

Maybe not tonight, though. They could have another fun date first – not that Cam thought there was much he was waiting to find out about Noah. Noah had been honest and forthright from the beginning about his intentions and who he was, and Cam loved that bravery.

*Braver than me.*

Cam had to tell the truth about at *least* the heart problem. He'd hide the “former professional hockey player” bit for a little longer so Noah didn't get starstruck like Cam had had happen before. It was only fair to tell the guy he was seeing that he couldn't have sex *too* much or play hockey *too* hard or even get into a stressful argument.

Cameron smiled when Noah clattered down the porch steps in tight black jeans, silver shoes, and a strappy silver top under a stunning blue sweater with art screen-printed on the silk. Noah's coat was half-closed so he didn't know what painting it was.

“A masterpiece,” he gestured toward Noah. “And the sweater's cute, too.”

Noah blushed and came to hook his arm around Cameron's. “You flatter me too much. My ego will explode.”

Cameron bumped their hips together. “It's not flattery if it's the truth.”

“It is too,” Noah laughed, leaning up to peck his lips. “How was your day?”

“Quiet,” Cameron admitted. “Made a few calls and recovered from yesterday, pretty much.”

“Oh, God, I felt it when I woke up,” Noah groaned, tipping his head back to gaze up at the evening sky. The sleek line of his throat, only broken by his Adam's apple, made Cameron lick his lips. “I barely got up.”

Cameron fought the urge to laugh. In truth, that had been part of a morning's workout for him, but he didn't want to make Noah feel bad. "It was intense," he agreed. "You didn't play last year?"

"I only moved here six months ago--"

"Oh, right, right. Sorry," Cameron chuckled. "I forgot. No ice hockey over the winter?"

"No. God, no. I'd freeze," Noah exclaimed. "And get crushed. Do I look like I'm built to be smashed into boards?"

Cameron's lips twitched and he glanced over to let his eyes flicker down Noah's slender body. "You're built to be smashed into walls, and doors, and staircase landings..." He freed his arm to run his hand down Noah's back. Cam hooked his arm around Noah's waist to pull him against him with a quick, playful jerk. "And mattresses..."

The sun hadn't set enough to hide the fact that Noah was blushing hard. Nonetheless, he was bantering right back, his arm sliding around Cameron's shoulders. "I like the way you think."

"And fuck," Cameron whispered, leaning in to press a kiss against the corner of Noah's jaw. A shiver ran down Noah's spine. Cam smirked, loosening his hold a little as he raised his voice again. "But that's for later."

"Yeah," Noah murmured, nearly tripping over a crack in the sidewalk from his inability to tear his eyes away from Cameron's.

"Eyes on the road," Cameron teased. He appreciated that he had that effect, but he didn't want Noah to smack into a telephone pole or something.

Noah pulled away a little and touched his face as if regaining his composure. Cameron's ego swelled even more. "What bar were you thinking?"

"Skylight? It's new since I moved away but it looks like the kind of place we could go... Are they open Wednesdays?"

"Yep. Good choice. It's not the gay bar. Fuck, the single gay bar here and all the straight students in it..." Noah rolled his eyes.

Cameron laughed. "Hey, you don't know they're straight. You would've thought I was," he teased.

"Nah," Noah said. He smirked as they waited at a red light. "I could have sussed you out in a few seconds."

“How?” Cameron laughed. Noah sounded so confident in himself.

“A little dirty dancing in just the right spot... eye contact...” Noah ground against his side, then took his hand to lead him across the road, his steps light and grin playful. “Get you to buy me a drink or two...”

“You were bold in Ottawa.”

“Not usually,” Noah laughed. “But with a hunk like you on the line... Everyone's gotta play dirty to get the one they want to go home with.”

Cameron squeezed Noah's hand, then laced their fingers as they approached the lights of downtown. “I'm impressed.”

Noah let go of his hand and drew away a little, giving him a moment's glance up and down. “Then you just pull back a little and see if they follow...”

Even though he registered Noah's words, Cameron didn't process them until it was too late. He was zig-zagging to follow Noah and get closer to him. “Oh.” He brushed a hand down Noah's arm. “You're a lot cleverer than I was back in university. When I was here, I just sort of hung out and waited for guys to choose me...”

Noah laughed, then pointed up. “There's the Skylight. Let's cross the street over there.” Their bodies brushed as Noah leaned into Cameron's shoulder.

Cameron snorted and reached out to grab Noah's hand. “We can cross here. Traffic's light.” He stepped off the sidewalk.

“And if we get caught jaywalking?” Noah rooted his feet for a moment, making Cameron glance back and tug him.

“I'll flutter my lashes,” Cameron deadpanned. “I can unbutton my shirt, if that'll help.”

Noah laughed and shook his head but followed as Cameron led him across the road to the bar Noah had pointed out.

They hadn't had a sip of alcohol yet, but Cameron's heart soared and his hands tingled every time he looked at Noah.

---

Over the first few cocktails, they chatted about their days. Cameron shared his frustration at waiting another three weeks for the houses to close, and Noah vented about the flaky arena board of directors.



Noah perked up, dragged out of his funk by a sudden thought. "You know, I know a lot of local artists... How were you thinking of decorating your new place?"

Cameron raised his eyebrow. "I thought with local art. Is that the right answer?"

"Is it true?" Noah was eager yet tentative.

Cameron smiled. "Yeah."

"Okay. Well, I can get some deals. And there's some auctions and charity nights and stuff so I can bring you to those and get an idea of your style... Um, assuming you want to."

"That'd be amazing," Cameron said, and he meant it. Even his fancy-ass Toronto loft hadn't been very personal. "An expert touch. The only thing that I know that I want, for sure, is my brother's work. He does steel art."

Noah got a funny look and Cameron hoped he wasn't biased against blacksmiths somehow. Some people thought blacksmiths only made medieval armor or swords. Yeah, his brother *did* make swords for local fencing clubs, but there was so much more to it.

Then, Noah asked, "Is your brother... Jackson Riley? Actually, is *your* last name Riley? I don't even know that yet!"

His brother's name made Cameron blink with surprise. "Yeah, it is. And yeah! That's my brother. What's your surname?"

"Clark." Noah laughed. "I know your brother."

*Oh, boy. He'd better not mean he **knows** him.* Cameron shook his head. "Small town."

He'd felt this claustrophobia before. Everyone knew at least one of his brothers, and there was nowhere he could go without seeing someone he knew. Even the bartender here had been in his university class years ago.

"Yeah. He's doing a piece for the art show, actually," Noah told him. "Has he mentioned it?"

"Not much. He doesn't like to show off until he's done a piece, so I'm waiting," Cameron shrugged. Now that he was worrying about how many degrees of separation there were between him and Noah, he couldn't get it off his mind. "You met him before?"

Noah paused, scanning Cameron's face. His eyes narrowed, and then a

smile burst over his face. "Oh, shit, no. I know what you're thinking--no," he laughed. "No, he's not my type."

Cameron let out a breath of relief and nudged Noah with his toe. "Dude, don't scare me like that."

Noah laughed and reached over the table to squeeze his hand. "Sorry! So, Cameron Riley... Are you a blacksmith, too?"

Cameron made a face. "No. My brothers and I are all pretty different. I mean, I've helped him out before, too, but... that was never my thing."

"Ah," Noah nodded. He was eying Cameron like he was trying to remember something.

Cameron had seen the exact expression before among hockey fans and guys he was dating, and sometimes those groups were one and the same. He'd made a policy of not sleeping with fans, just in case.

To distract Noah, he nudged him gently. "Hey, you up for dancing? Or are you going through the Yellow Pages in your brain?"

Noah snapped out of it and laughed. "Sorry. Yeah, I'd like to dance. I know a place close by."

"Perfect."

They finished their cocktails and headed to the club Noah chose, holding hands the whole way. This was a hell of a way to come out: on the arm of a hot little guy with a lightning-fast wit and a deep local knowledge.

And, thank God, not too deep a knowledge of the locals.

---

The blinking lights bounced off their bodies as they rotated, swishing up and down through the air and sometimes blinding Cameron.

Cameron's heart rate was a little up, but he was safe: he'd counted while Noah used the bathroom half an hour ago.

It wasn't his heart, but his legs telling him to stop dancing now.

"God, you gotta be tired out," he laughed as one singer's voice faded into another.

Noah's face gleamed with sweat, but his eyes were sparkling and he had a gorgeous, healthy flush to his skin. Cameron had stayed close all night, not wanting anyone else to muscle in on this territory.

“Come home with me,” Noah invited him, sliding his arms around Cameron's neck. “Assuming you're not too straight for me, of course...”

Cameron laughed. “You caught me,” he teased, leaning in to kiss Noah. “Detective Clark.”

Noah winked and pulled him off the dance floor. They stumbled together, neither of them drunk but both high on each other and three hours of dancing. Pulsing music and flashing lights and sometimes singing along – Cameron off-key, Noah with sweet, melodic tones... The walk back to Noah's place was chillier than earlier that evening but it didn't take long. They were too busy swaying into each other. They hummed and laughed over nothing at all.

Noah fumbled to unlock the door and Cameron wrapped his arms around him from behind, kissing his shoulder and pushing the door open for him.

“Thank you,” Noah laughed and they almost tangled up as they stepped together into the house. They pulled off and discarded shoes and jackets. “Want some water?”

“No, that's okay,” Cameron assured him. “I haven't had that much.”

Noah nodded. “I should be all right, too.” He took Cameron by the hand to lead him straight upstairs to the bedroom.

They stripped off together, still grinding and kissing playfully. Nonetheless, Cameron didn't feel Noah pressuring him to fuck. It seemed they were both contented to just... be together that night.

Cameron crawled into bed and raised the covers for Noah, pulling his bare body in against him and spooning around him. After dancing for so long, the bed seemed almost too still. The room didn't spin around him, so he was safe from hangovers.

“Good night,” Noah murmured, snuggling back into Cameron and resting his arm along Cam's. Cam found a spot under Noah's head to slide his other arm. “I had a lot of fun. Thank you.”

“Thank you,” Cameron countered, smiling to himself. “You're wonderful to be with.”

“You, too,” Noah murmured, twisting in Cameron's hold to kiss him one more time.

This kiss was slow and sweet, with no pressure to be anywhere or do anything. Their lips gently parted, tongue tips playing at each other's lower lips before they pulled apart with a slight smack.

Noah gave a contented sigh and settled back down onto Cameron's arm and against his back.

With Noah, even a night without sex was one of the best Cam could remember. *This is exactly what I want.* The thought made Cameron smile. He breathed along with Noah's deep, steady breathing and he was asleep.

## Noah

Bubbles rose through the batter and Noah stood at the ready with his flipper. The edges of the pancake hadn't quite firmed up enough, but they were close.

When it was ready, he flipped the pancake and allowed himself a self-indulgent grin. He was *great* at pancakes. He'd already got bacon done and warming in the oven, and he'd wait to do eggs until he heard Cameron get up. This was the second-to-last pancake anyway.

And, speak of the devil, he heard water running in the bathroom upstairs.

He turned on the heat for the eggs, then dumped the mixed-up eggs and milk into the pan. He hummed under his breath, scrambling the eggs while finishing the last pancake.

"Good morning," Cameron greeted. "Oh my God, you even cook breakfast."

Noah grinned at Cam and glanced back over his shoulder at him. "Morning, sleepyhead. Did I tire you out with all that dancing?"

Cameron laughed and leaned against the counter, staying out of his way. "A little. Wow, that looks good. Pancakes and eggs?"

"Bacon's in the oven already, with the rest of the pancakes."

"Music to my ears."

"Go sit at the table," Noah directed him, pointing over to the kitchen table with his wooden egg spatula. It was draped with a yellow sunflower tablecloth and set with condiments. He'd chosen maple syrup, ketchup, butter, and whipped cream... canned, not freshly-made. He wasn't *that* prepared.

Cameron laughed. "Yes, sir," he teased and leaned in to steal a quick kiss before seating himself.

Noah brought their plates to the table a minute later. He slid Cameron's plate in front of him first and then his own. When he dropped into his chair, it was with a contented smile. Then, he

remembered his apron and stood up to take it off.

“Aw, it's cute,” Cameron teased. It was the usual cheesy *kiss the cook* apron, but it had a little rainbow over the words.

“My old roomie got it for me in university, and I never quite grew out of it,” Noah admitted with a laugh. He tossed it onto the counter and sat down to enjoy breakfast.

Only a few minutes in, though, Cameron drew a breath and squared his shoulders.

*Uh oh. A conversation. I hope it's a good one.*

“I've got something to tell you.”

Noah winced. “Well, now that I've discovered all my deep-seated anxieties...”

“Sorry,” Cameron laughed. “Don't worry, it's not – I don't think it's *that* bad. I should have said something earlier, but... I've got a couple medical things going on.”

Noah blinked, then fidgeted. “Not...”

“No, I mean, a heart problem.”

*Oh. Ohhh.* “Like... exercise-aggravated?” Noah instantly felt guilty. They'd danced for hours, and played hockey, and he was always walking over to see him...

“Yes, but it's not constant,” Cameron assured him. “It's not formally diagnosed right now. The doctors tell me I can't do... pro-level sports. No sustained, elevated levels of stress, long periods of exercise, that kind of thing. A casual pickup game every week won't kill me.”

“Okay.” Noah put down his fork to gulp orange juice and cleared his throat. “Even stress?”

“Yeah. High levels, that is.”

“What about beekeeping?” Did Uncle Bill know yet? Probably not. “I can tell my uncle about it--”

“No, that's fine,” Cameron assured him, reaching over the table to touch his hand. “I didn't want you to freak out about it or anything. I know my limits. Beekeeping will be okay as long as I'm not running two miles and vaulting fences to get away from angry bees...”

That broke Noah's tension, and he laughed. “Okay. Sorry, I don't want to make you feel weird about it,” he apologized. It was startling to

hear this after several dates, but there hadn't been a good time to bring it up earlier. "And I can still tell Uncle Bill--"

"No, I'll handle it. I'll let him know beforehand, but like I said, I doubt it'll be an issue," Cameron assured him. "Everything I've been reading says you're supposed to stay calm and... zen around them, you know? So that'll be perfect for me."

Noah nodded. "So, why tell me? I mean, I'm glad you did, but..." he trailed off, finishing the last few bites of his food and setting down his utensils.

Cameron had already polished off his plate and he was leaning back, watching Noah. "I just need to make sure there's not much stress between us, too. I'd... If you're up for it, I wanna have that conversation."

"I thought we were about to until you started this one," Noah chuckled. "The relationship one?"

"That's the one." Cameron's expression was careful, yet he was smiling. "Do you want to date me?"

A shiver of delight coursed up Noah's spine. "*Fuck, yes.*"

That might have come out a little louder than he'd meant it to, but Cameron just laughed. "Well, that leaves no doubt in my mind."

Noah laughed, too, and stood up from the table to take Cameron's hand and pull him to his feet. "Leave the dishes, I'll deal with them later. If I'd known I just had to cook you breakfast..."

Cameron chuckled, sliding his arm around Noah's waist and kissing him. He tasted like maple syrup, and Noah resisted the urge to suck on his lower lip.

When they pulled apart, Noah slapped Cameron's ass. "Go on, get upstairs. I've got spare toothbrushes for you. You can even choose your own color."

"You got a blue one?"

"I don't know. The package is in the middle drawer. I don't keep track," Noah laughed. He gathered the dishes and dumped them in the dishwasher as Cameron disappeared upstairs. Cameron's chuckle echoed in the stairwell.

When Cameron was out of sight, Noah took a moment to pump his fist in the air, then rubbed his face, trying to calm down. *Play it cool. Oh, God, you have a boyfriend. You're someone's boyfriend. No, calm down...*

He followed Cameron upstairs to brush his teeth, still beaming.

---

Cam squeezed Noah's hand as he stood outside the art gallery with him. Once they dropped hands, Noah tucked both his hands in his jacket pockets instead.

"You didn't have to walk me to work," Noah said for the fifth time that walk, but he was smiling hard. In fact, neither of them had stopped smiling since their conversation over breakfast.

"Of course I did. That's what boyfriends do. It's the honeymoon phase; enjoy it," Cam teased.

Noah laughed. "Until you get sick of me and send me on the bus?" he teased.

Cameron laughed. "Never."

"What are you up to today?"

"Sorting out boxes at my broth-- at Jackson's house, and tidying up. Still gotta live with him for three weeks... I want to be a good guest."

Noah's chest swelled with pride and he leaned up to kiss him goodbye. "Aww. Have fun."

After they kissed goodbye one more time and Cameron waved, they parted ways. Noah walked into the building sizzling with energy and ideas.

Today was going to be great.



## Cameron

The days passed in a blur as Cameron did spring yard work for his parents and tidied up Jackson's house. Cameron still expected to hear from Bill any time. He kept his phone on him, ready to race to his new apprenticeship as soon as Bill said the word.

He and Jackson decided against renting a storage locker. Jackson just wouldn't look for a buyer until the move was over. They'd work together to clean up, repaint, and do a few light renovations once the house was empty to increase the value.

To his surprise, Jackson showed up to the next pickup hockey game, along with another artist. Both of them lingered around the periphery of the fence, sketching what was going on. Cameron was a little self-conscious at first, but he forgot about them in the excitement and frustration of amateur hockey.

Holy shit, these guys were clueless, but he couldn't expect much more. Kevin was the exception, and fair enough since he was the only semi-pro player. He was just waiting to be drafted. Cameron still didn't push himself to his limits. He didn't want to stand out or seem like he thought he was too good for the rest of the guys.

He and Noah didn't get the chance to see each other after hockey since Noah had to meet the artists and discuss arrangements. By Saturday, he was getting anxious to see his new boyfriend.

The days were warming up. People were walking in light jackets or sweaters without a heavy winter coat over top. It was supposed to be clear with not a chance of rain, either.

It was perfect weather to walk to the art gallery.

Cameron trotted up the steps and inside to the front desk a little before noon, glancing around to spot Noah. There were a few spacious, bright gallery rooms on the main floor, but no signs of Noah.

"Hi," he greeted the clerk who was already reaching for the computer mouse. "Uh, I'm here to see Noah, if I can...?"

"Oh, of course. His office is through that way," the clerk pointed down

a narrow hall.

"Thanks." Cameron slowed at each door to read the plaques. Some of the names he vaguely recognized from Noah's conversations about work, but none made him smile like seeing *Noah Clark* on the third door from the end.

He knocked on the open door and stepped inside.

Wow. A few deep green houseplants snaked out from between shelves and rows of books. Art snuck into every aspect of the office. Paintings hung from the walls while sculptures sat atop filing cabinets. A mixed media art piece shadowed the computer monitor.

"Welcome," Noah greeted him. Cameron's eyes were drawn back to his main interest in the room: his handsome lover. Noah was dressed in a gray waistcoat and dark blue collared shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

God, he was gorgeous.

"Hi," Cameron answered, gesturing around the room. "Nice place here. It suits you."

The titles of the books, the decorative art, the bright window overlooking the street outside... It seemed like the kind of place Noah would hang out just for fun.

"Thanks," Noah laughed. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"When's your lunch break?"

"Right about now, I bet," Noah winked and glanced at his watch as he stood up. He grabbed a peacoat from the back of his chair to shrug on. "If you're asking, of course."

"I am. I don't know where's a good place for lunch around here, but I'll take you there," Cameron offered with a laugh. "There used to be a good lunch place that did sandwiches and stuff."

"A cafe? Yeah, there's a few good ones nearby."

"Let's do that," Cameron suggested, and he was met with a bright smile.

"Nice to see you again, by the way," Noah murmured. "I've been missing you." He left his coat unbuttoned as he stepped out from behind the desk and approached Cameron. Noah didn't hesitate to stretch up the inch or so that separated them and press a kiss to Cameron's lips.

Cameron cupped Noah's cheek to peck him on the lips, then put his hand on his shoulder. "How's your day going?"

"Oh, you know," Noah sighed with a touch of that amusing over-dramatic attitude. He led Cameron out of the office and down the hall, pausing at an open doorway. "Sarah? I'm going out for lunch."

"Okay," Sarah answered. The petite woman pushed her dyed red hair out of her eyes as she glanced up. She was clearly taken aback to see Cameron standing there with his hand still on Noah's shoulder. "Oh, hello."

"Hi. I'm Cam," Cameron introduced himself while Noah smiled at him.

Sarah's eyes lit up. "Ah, *you're* Cam... Nice to meet you," she winked. "Go on, Noah. Have a good lunch date."

"Thanks." Noah steered Cameron back down the hall and around the reception desk to the door.

When they walked down the steps together, Noah reached out to lace their fingers and swung their hands.

"Was it okay that I did that?" Cameron asked with a quick glance at Noah's expression.

"Did what? Oh, no, that's fine. She knew. Everyone knows," Noah laughed. "Remember, there was never a closet for me."

"Right," Cameron laughed under his breath. Noah was so expressive that he almost took it for granted now. "So, what have you been up to that's so stressful?"

Noah laughed. "Well, when you put it that way... Just arranging a charity show in my off-time, and a few of the artists are more... flaky than others. But for charity, you can't complain."

"You're always arranging shows. Is that typical for you? Or is this an unusually busy time?"

Noah led them to the crosswalk and paused with him. "Er, no... it is a bit unusual. I usually try to stick to one exhibition at a time, but the charity show is something I'm doing personally and the hockey show is for work."

"Ahh."

"Now I have to sign a bunch of loan paperwork and try to help Sarah untangle some... acquisition problems. There's a tour at three, too. And a members-only evening that I have to help with. Well, I

shouldn't say *have to*. I like the members. They're much more polite than the general public. Then again, I shouldn't malign the general public..."

"I get the idea," Cameron laughed. "People can't keep their hands off?"

"Oh, tell me about it. This one guy tried to touch this textured painting in gallery two – I need to take you through it so you know what I'm talking about, by the way. I *just* stopped him in time."

Cameron winced. "Even I know better."

"You like to play the uncultured bad boy, but you know a thing or two," Noah addressed him with a wink. "I've noticed."

Cameron's cheeks heated up and he squeezed Noah's hand. "Where's the cafe?"

"Just a few doors down," Noah grinned. "What about you? How was your day?"

Cam struggled to think of anything interesting that had happened. "I finished consolidating some of my boxes and helped Jackson pack some of his stuff in the basement."

"That's important."

"Mmm. The move's coming up soon, like it or not. We still have to talk about the details – which of us will move in first. Presumably me since I have less stuff, but..."

"Well, with three of you, you can all help each other. And I'll help," Noah offered.

Cameron grinned. He playfully squeezed Noah's bicep before pulling open the cafe door. "I wouldn't want to overwork you."

"Hey," Noah laughed. "I happen to lift weights at home sometimes."

"Sometimes?" Cameron teased.

Noah blushed. "When I remember."

"Ahhh."

Cameron chose a table with Noah near a window. A waitress approached to hand over menus, and they relaxed into light lunchtime conversation and flirtation.

This time, Cameron didn't let Noah escape back to work without

promising him another date on Wednesday. The weather was supposed to be this great once again then.

“Texting alone just isn't enough,” Cameron smiled as he and Noah ambled back toward the art gallery.

“No, it isn't,” Noah agreed. “We should see each other every time the weather's this nice.”

“That'll be every day in a few months' time,” Cameron grinned. “Sounds perfect.”

Noah laughed and leaned in to kiss Cameron. “Wednesday,” he promised before pulling away. “Thank you for the lunch date.”

“Thank *you*.”

Cameron knew he couldn't get used to dropping his boyfriend off at work with a goodbye kiss. His own job would start up soon, and from the sounds of it, he wouldn't have much free time.

For now, he'd enjoy what he had.

## Noah

For a Wednesday afternoon, there were a surprising number of people out and about. As they crossed the bridge to the heart of downtown, Noah leaned in to murmur to Cameron, "I think they're all skipping work today."

The weather was gorgeous enough, after all. They hardly needed their jackets, and the sun was bright on their faces.

"They could all be retail shift workers," Cameron retorted with a laugh. "Or students. Or just have the day off, like you."

Noah was off because he'd worked the last weekend, but he couldn't complain. The lunch date had broken up his weekend. "Right, right," he dismissed Cameron with a laugh. "I think they're all skiving."

"Skiving," Cameron repeated with a laugh. "What a word."

Noah's pocket buzzed with the distinctive ringtone he'd assigned to Uncle Bill. It had made him laugh when he'd done it, but now it seemed a little... on the nose. "Hold on, my phone's--"

"Tell me that isn't Bill."

"Uh... it might be." Noah fished out his phone, his cheeks hot. "I thought it was clever." The buzzing sound stopped when he answered. "Hello?"

It was indeed his uncle, and his voice was dead serious. It melted the smile from Noah's face. "Noah, there's a problem at the yard."

"Shit. Which one?"

"The corner lot. A bear."

"No," Noah whispered, a chill running down his spine. He let go of Cameron's hand and adjusted the phone against his ear. "You need cleanup help?"

"Yeah. It must have been last night, when that bear report came in. I decided to check the yard this morning just in case. Good thing, too. Some of the hives haven't swarmed yet, but they'll be close."

“Did it go through the fence?”

Uncle Bill's voice was clipped. “Fence was off. Can you make it in?”

“Yeah, I'm off.” Cameron was gesturing at himself. “Hold on.” Noah covered the phone. “You want to help, too? Bear in the yard.” He sped up his steps and Cameron kept pace.

“I heard,” Cameron murmured and nodded. He was pale. “I'm coming, as long as I won't be in the way.”

“No, you'll be helpful.” Noah felt relieved to have one more pair of hands, even if Cameron might be a little shy at first. This would get him over *that*. Noah had only been to one destroyed yard before, but it had been a hell of an experience. “Hey, Uncle Bill, Cam's coming too. He'll give me a ride so we'll be there ASAP. You got gear for us?”

“Yep. See you.”

Noah shoved his phone in his pocket and glanced at Cameron as they walked. His nervousness was in turn unnerving for Noah to see. “You sure you'll be okay?”

“Fine,” Cameron answered, his voice tight. “Is that the yard we went to?”

“Yeah.”

“Does he visit a lot?”

“Probably not, if he's been running around unwrapping other hives. Why?”

Cameron winced so hard Noah thought he must be in some physical pain. His steps sped up even more and Noah had to trot to keep pace with him. “Not since we were there?”

Noah drew breath to answer, then stopped in his tracks. Cameron grabbed his arm to pull him along. “Shit. Oh, no.” Fuck. Cam was *right*.

They hadn't turned the fence on after he'd shown Cameron the yard.

Had they?

He searched his memory. He remembered hooking the gate back on, laughing with Cameron, walking to the car...

Not turning the fence on.

“Oh, fucking *shit*,” Noah whispered and let Cameron pull him back

into a half-jogging pace. "You're right."

"I'm sorry," Cameron murmured, his voice hoarse. "I must have distracted you..."

"No, it's my fault. That's a basic... that's so basic it's *stupid*," Noah groaned. Cameron led them across the road to the cafe where Cam had parked, and Noah circled to the driver's side. "I'm at fault."

Noah was glad Cameron was driving, since his hands shook.

Silence fell for a minute while Noah ripped himself apart for the stupid mistake. If the hives were all gone, that would be down to him. The gear was expensive, too, and that wasn't counting the loss of bees and honey. And the loss of life: bears ate bees, and many would have died attacking it.

And, shit, Cameron's heart!

"Oh, are you--" Noah wasn't quite sure how to ask this. He looked carefully at Cameron to make sure his paleness wasn't from his heart condition. "Are you okay with the stress?"

Cameron sensed his thoughts and reached out to squeeze his thigh. "Hey," he murmured to get Noah's attention. "I'm okay. What happened... happened. I can't be sheltered from everything. We just have to clean up and make amends now, right?"

"Yeah."

"As long as it's not playoff stress, I'm all right."

That got Noah to smile weakly, at least. Was Cam the type to not shave his beard until the playoffs ended? "The Moncton game won't be that bad," he promised.

Cameron paused, a frown line between his brows for a few moments before he nodded. "Oh, right. Yeah."

They hadn't been on the same page just then, but Noah didn't have time to worry about it. He had a huge mistake to make up for, and one that affected more than just his family.

Uncle Bill was going to be pissed, and please God let it be at him alone. Noah *really* hoped he hadn't gotten Cameron fired before he even began his apprenticeship.



## Cameron

When they pulled up near the field, gravel crunching, Cameron parked in the same spot as before. There were a few open rubber tubs at the top of the driveway. He spotted white bee suits, some silver and bright blue things poking out of the tubs, and a bag of straw and grass.

Noah was over his brief moments of crushing guilt and into action mode. "Okay," Noah said, hopping out and slamming the car door. "We'll get suited up. He always has a few spare suits kicking around, so they must be in here."

Cameron smelled wood smoke from nearby. He'd been reading up on bee books in his spare time lately, but there was nothing like hands-on experience. "Is that--"

"The smokers, yeah," Noah nodded. "I'll show you how to use those, too." He was rummaging through bins. "Large?"

"Yeah."

"Here you go." Noah handed him a suit, and Cameron swallowed hard. *This is the trial by fire.* It unzipped, so he pulled down the zipper and pulled the hood back. Elastics around the ankles and... those must be sleeves...

"I just step in, right?"

"Oh, crap. Right." Noah was already halfway into his suit and Cam watched him kick off his shoes, to shove his legs through the suit legs "I'll help get it done up."

Cam imitated Noah's movements, leaning against the car to keep his balance when he pulled off one shoe at a time. He pulled the suit up around him, noticing the way the shoulders stretched out. The suit was almost a little small for his broad frame, but it would do its job. Thank God he'd worn his sneakers for the walk around town and over the bridge – he didn't mind them getting muddy.

When he was in with it zipped up, Cameron fidgeted with the hood, twisting to get a look at it. Noah had pulled it up and zipped it up in ten seconds flat.

“Look straight ahead,” Noah coached, pulling the hood down and zipping it up. Cameron didn't even have the heart to acknowledge the tingle of chemistry between them as Noah's fingers brushed his chin.

“There.”

“I'm safe?”

Noah circled around him and double-checked each zipper, then nodded. “With gloves, you will be. And better boots.”

He rummaged through another tub and pulled out gumboots. “I hope you're around size nine or ten.”

“Yeah, nine and a half.”

“Jesus, there's a bit of luck. Nines or tens? I can do either.”

“I'll take the tens.”

Noah crouched near a box lighting piles of straw inside two silver tubular bellows while coaching him through pulling the suit ankles around the boots. Then, Noah handed one over to him. “Don't touch the metal. It'll take a couple minutes to really get burning.”

“Right. You've... done this a lot?” Noah seemed to know his shit. Why hadn't *he* done an apprenticeship with his uncle?

“No. This isn't normal for bees,” Noah assured him, handing over a pair of gloves. They walked down the road toward the corner lot. “They were calm before, but they'll be looking for every chance to attack now. Check your suit often.”

Cameron swallowed hard and pulled the gloves on. Compared to his hockey gear, this thing was a suit of armor. It was clumsy and baggy in some spots. The hood obscured his vision and the boots gave him a clunky step.

It felt like he was in goal, only there were thousands of tiny opponents and he had no idea what to expect from them. Like every playoff nightmare ever, then.

Speaking of which, the moment in the car had been a little too close for comfort. He *had* to tell Noah the truth sometime soon.

As they reached the edge of the lot, Cameron heard a distinctive deep rumbling sound. It wasn't the same quiet hum he'd heard before. It was... angry, and it sent a chill down his spine.

“That's them,” Noah confirmed. “Deep breaths. You ever meditate?”

“No. Someone tried to teach me before. I can visualize, though.”

“Then do deep breathing like you're visualizing,” Noah murmured, giving him a concerned frown. He was clearly worried for Cameron's health and the concern was sweet. Cameron was already pretty calm – or he had been until he'd heard that buzz, anyway.

He breathed in and out a few times until his shoulders sank and he slid into the zone. “Ready.”

They stepped around the last grove of trees and Cameron almost choked on his deep breath.

Pallets were askew, wooden boxes scattered across the field, frames tossed across on the dirt and grass and mud. It looked like a thousand-pound toddler had thrown a tantrum.

Clusters of bees were forming on boxes – supers, Cameron reminded himself of their name – and frames. Some of the frames were ripped apart, one box shattered against rocks behind the pallet.

Noah moaned under his breath as he gazed around at the twenty-odd hives. The ones near the back of the field were fine, but the dozen closest hives had all been destroyed. Their contents were scattered everywhere.

Another man was already there in a suit – Bill, presumably – and crouched over a box, gathering scattered frames.

“Hey, Uncle Bill. Where should we start?”

Bill raised a hand but didn't look away yet. “Help look for queens. Those three need queens spotted. I think we're screwed, but if you can find one...”

Noah led Cameron over to the closest box and crouched by it. Cameron flinched at the harsh buzzing around the back of his head. Bees were circling both of them, landing on the hood near their ears and throat and crawling across the black masks. “Okay. Queen bees are much bigger than the others. See those there?”

“The big ones? Yeah.”

“Those are drones. They're not the queen. Those are workers, those are drones. The queen's bigger than both of them. When you see her, you can't miss her. Help me out – look on one side of a frame while I check the other.”

Cameron crouched opposite Noah as Noah pulled out a frame, then scooted up closer for a better look. He flinched, half-expecting stings

from every bee crawling over the frame, but they stayed on it. A dozen or more bees were crawling over Noah – no, two or three dozen.

*They can't get in.*

Cameron focused his gaze on the frame, squinting at the masses of bees crawling across the frames. He shook his head slowly, scanning up and down and back and forth.

Then, Noah flipped the frame over to exchange sides.

“No?”

“No,” Cameron confirmed.

The next frame was the same, though Cameron gave a few false alarms from thinking drones were queens. On the third frame, though, Cameron caught his breath. “Oh, shit. I think that's her.”

Noah gently turned the frame around for a look and Cameron scooted close to point out the one he meant. She was larger and darker than the others surrounding her.

“Yes,” Noah breathed out. Even through the hood, Cameron saw the smile of pleasure and relief crack his grim expression. “We've got one, Bill.”

“Thank God. Seal them up, hopefully they'll stay put.”

Cameron helped Noah get the frames arranged and the lid back on, following Noah's cues on what he needed next.

When the lid went back on, Cameron breathed out a sigh of relief. “So, same thing for the next two?”

“Yep.”

Noah's uncle was approaching. “It's not good. We're going to lose a lot.”

Noah rose to his feet and Cameron mirrored him. “Uncle Bill – it was us. I think we forgot to turn the fence on. I'm a stupid... I'm stupid. I'm sorry.”

Cameron cleared his throat. “I'm sorry, too. I should have known better.”

Bill waved a hand. “Doesn't matter,” he cut off their apologies. It wasn't unkind, but he wasn't mincing words, either. “Shit happens. Right now, we just gotta work fast so we don't lose too many swarms.

I was planning to unwrap the last big yard today so this is a setback, but we've gotta save these ones."

"We're here as long as you need us," Noah promised with a glance at Cameron.

Cameron nodded instantly.

For the first time, Bill relaxed a little. "Thanks, boys. All right, get searching for queens while I try to piece together that one."

They couldn't spot queens in the other two hives. Noah stacked up boxes and put plastic mesh between them to keep them separate in case they'd missed them. Noah told him if both had queens they would be kept apart from each other. Otherwise, they could raise a new queen of their own.

Cameron did his best to memorize every nugget of knowledge Noah or Bill passed along. Together, they gathered empty frames, shook other frames into hives, looked for queens, and reassembled hives.

An hour in, the first sharp sting flared in his wrist. "Oh, fuck--!"

Noah was by his side already. "First sting." He grabbed Cam's hand and pulled back the glove long enough to scrape his nail along Cameron's skin.

"Ow," Cameron groaned at the extra scrape to the stung skin.

Noah pulled the glove back down over his bare skin before the bees got in and squeezed his hand apologetically. "Gotta get the stinger out. You're not allergic, are you?"

"Now's a good time to ask," Bill laughed, but he was glancing at them with concern.

"No, no," Cameron assured them both. "I'm fine."

"I've got antihistamines in the car," Noah added. "You can take one now, if you want."

Cameron squeezed Noah's arm. "It's okay," he assured him. "I've had a lot worse. What's next?"

"We're just about there. You two want to bring the damaged stuff back to the property while I put the fence on?" Bill asked, and Cameron nodded. He squatted to pick up a few boxes from the stack, balancing the weight against himself. Noah grabbed the last two boxes and led him out of the field.

A twinge of guilt shuddered through Cam as they passed the fence control box. They walked across the ditch to the road, then around to a shed on the apiary property to drop everything off.

Once they'd placed their burdens in the shed and closed it up, Noah got Cameron to spin around and brushed bees off him. Cameron brushed two off Noah before nodding. "You're safe, too."

They unzipped their hoods and gasped fresh air, the light bright and the air open around them now.

"We made it," Noah smiled, walking back up the driveway to the boxes of gear. He paused and caught Cameron's hand. Their gloves sticky with wax and sap and honey, the gloves audibly cracked as he peeled his hand away, and they shared a laugh.

"Yeah," Cameron murmured. His wrist still stung from his single sting, and Noah had gotten two as well. Bill's five had happened before they'd gotten there.

Noah pulled off his gloves and tossed them into the gear boxes. Once Cameron followed suit, Noah leaned in for a strong hug. "It was half my fault, too," he murmured as a sort of reminder, then pulled back to unzip his suit and work his way out of it.

Cameron pulled off his glove, relieved to see his wrist wasn't too swollen. His fear was that Bill wouldn't see it that way, but part of him wanted to take full responsibility, too. He'd been deliberately distracting Noah a little in the yard... And vice versa. Six of one, half a dozen of the other.

Bill gave a tired nod of acknowledgment as he approached and they all fought their way out of the white protective suits. "Cameron, your job starts tomorrow and we'll call it square. I should have checked the fence. I usually check the hives weekly or more, too, but I was too focused on carpentry and unwrapping hives. It was my own damn fault."

Cameron shook his head slightly. "Still, it didn't have to happen."

"It didn't, but we all learn." Bill bundled his suit into a box before extinguishing the smokers with water. "It could have been anything else, too. Ten days is too long this time of year. They could've had disease, swarms, too little forage... I was sloppy. Kinda like driving. When you've been driving for years, you don't always use your turn signal. Teaching a kid – I taught Noah here – reminds you of all that."

Noah made a face. "I hate it when people don't signal," he muttered,

and Cameron and Bill shared a chuckle.

"I'm sorry for my part in it, regardless," Cameron told Bill, approaching him to shake hands. Bill's grip was firm and his smile sincere. "And I'm glad you're still willing to offer me the job."

"Course I am. It was all of our faults," Bill told him and Noah, glancing between them. "I hope this doesn't put you off the job, though. Most days aren't like this."

"Not at all," Cameron promised. "Now that I've had the crash course, I'm looking forward to the easier bits."

Noah laughed. "Yeah, but one sting? You'll get a lot more than that."

"Just flick 'em out, like he did for you," Bill added, sitting on a closed bin to change shoes. Cam leaned against the car to do the same, returning the gumboots to the bin in favor of his regular sneakers. "It'll be good to have an extra pair of hands... and an extra brain to catch my mistakes."

"I'll do my best," Cameron promised, hoping that didn't sound too cheesy.

"Off you go home, then. Get some rest. You'll need it."

Cameron made himself focus on driving so he didn't make any errors in judgment from sluggishness. His hand hurt a little whenever he had to turn the wheel, but he pushed past that, too.

"Back to your place to change and treat those stings? Here, open wide."

Cameron pulled up at a stop sign and opened his lips to let Noah pop the pill into his mouth, then took a gulp of water from his car water bottle. "Thanks. Yeah, we'll stop by Jackson's first. Assuming you don't just wanna be dropped off at home."

"Not at all," Noah smiled. His gaze was half-lidded with exhaustion, but he was pleased.

Despite all they'd just seen and done, the silence was more contented than tense this time.

Noah

"Sorry for the mess," Cameron apologized before they even climbed out of the car, and Noah smiled. He seemed self-conscious about bringing Noah here, but Noah knew they were moving. He couldn't judge them on their pre-move chaos.

When they entered the cute little house, though, Noah didn't see much to apologize for. Just boxes in neat stacks, and Jackson in a t-shirt with the sleeves pushed over his shoulders.

"Oh, hey, Cam," Jackson told Cam, his eyes on Noah. "Hi, Noah."

"Hey. Jackson, Noah – Noah, Jackson. I gather you know each other anyway."

Jackson laughed and nodded. "Through the art show, yeah. So you two...?"

Noah nodded.

"We're dating," Cameron confirmed.

"Wow, congrats." Jackson glanced at Cameron, then narrowed his eyes. "You're swollen. Did something happen?" Then he noticed Noah raising a foot to pull down his sock from his ankle and inspect it. "So are you."

"The bees had an emergency. I went in to help," Cameron told Jackson. "Noah, do you mind if I change and grab some more antihistamines?"

"No, go ahead," Noah assured him.

"Sit down. Can I get you anything?" Jackson offered, dusting his hands off after taping a box shut.

Noah nodded. "Water would be amazing, thanks. Long day out there."

"Yeah? How about the art show – that coming along all right?"

*Thank God we've got that in common already,* Noah thought. He watched Cameron disappear upstairs while Jackson went to grab him a glass of water. "Yeah, really well. I think Jo's art will fix everything.



They accepted the proposal and we've got the full space."

"Oh, awesome." Jackson came back with three glasses of water in his hands. He set two down by the couch, then leaned back in the armchair nearby with the third for himself. "So you're dating my little brother? He never said."

"He didn't?" Noah laughed under his breath.

"Nah, but he's always been quiet," Jackson grinned. "He hates being teased. But I'm glad for you both. He could use someone smart like you around to keep his head on straight."

Noah laughed again, his brief worry dissipating. "Ouch. Can't blame him."

"Nah, he's plenty smart on his own," Jackson chuckled. "He was up for team captain before, on his team."

"Yeah?" Noah wasn't sure what team Jackson meant, but he smiled regardless. "Where was that?"

"In Toronto. That's why I had to get sketches of him here, to finish my piece off."

Noah blinked a few times. "Sorry, I don't..."

Jackson's eyebrows raised. "The Toronto minor leagues. The hockey team he quit."

Oh. "...As in, pro hockey."

Jackson grimaced, worry clouding his expression as he glanced up to the stairs and then back to Noah. "So he didn't tell you he was a pro hockey player."

Noah fidgeted with his water glass. This was awkward. "Yeah, no." It was his turn to learn something new about the man. *A pro. Oh my god, and I invited him to play on our little team. He must think we all suck.*

"Don't take it too hard. He's going through a bit of a... rough transition, I think." Jackson cleared his throat. "So, how were the bees?"

The distraction worked: Noah explained that he and Cam hadn't turned on the bee yard fence and a bear had struck. Jackson sympathized as Noah described the cleanup.

When Cameron came back downstairs, he gulped down some water and then nodded. "Ready to go to yours?" he asked Noah. "Be back

later,” he added with a glance to Jackson.

“No rush,” Jackson assured him. “I’m about at the limit of what I can pack up anyway. Enjoy your evening.”

“You, too,” Noah bade, standing up again while Cameron led him back to the door.

“See you around,” Jackson answered.

Despite how well they’d gotten on, the surprising news left Noah glad he had the chance to talk privately with Cameron. But how was he gonna bring this up?

“Your brother’s very different. He told me before he doesn’t play hockey at all... and you said you can’t do the forging stuff he does.” It was a clumsy segue, but it was all he could think of.

“Different strokes,” Cameron shrugged. “Why, you were recruiting?”

“Yeah. We can always use more good players on the team. You’re good.”

Cam tensed up a little and Noah wondered if he’d get the truth, but then he relaxed. Suddenly, the playoffs comment earlier made more sense – and lots of things did. “Thanks. But I’ve been thinking the stress might not be good. I can’t push myself much, and... beekeeping might be more stressful than I was thinking.”

“Of course. You can quit anytime,” Noah reassured Cam, reaching out to squeeze his arm.

Cameron flinched and nodded. “I’ll think about it.” Cam didn’t make eye contact for the rest of the short drive to Noah’s place, and Noah didn’t push him.

Noah just glanced out his window, watching familiar streets pass. His new boyfriend was a little more closed-off than he’d anticipated.

*Why doesn't he want me to know such a big part of him?*

Cameron

“Pull out the staple, and then we can cut away the rest of the foam.”

Cameron held the pliers tightly through his thick glove. He wiggled the metal left and right. Once it popped out of the side of the super, the foam draped around the box came free.

“That's it. Now just do that a billion more times,” Bill told him with a laugh.

Cameron echoed his quiet laugh and nodded, dropping the staple into a small bucket. The hives were wrapped in pairs with thick black foam and black plastic wrap. Some were two or three boxes high. He was warier of those ones, since they sounded louder.

The day was warm, a perfect first day out in the fields with the bees.

Compared to yesterday's experience, they were quite calm. There were only one or two bees flying at him when he came too close to their entrances. These ones didn't buzz angrily past his ear every few seconds.

“This is pretty light work, but there's just a lot of it.”

“Yeah, of course. I don't mind at all,” Cameron assured Bill. “I won't have a lot to do in town until I get the house anyway.”

“When's that?”

“Two weeks.”

Bill nodded as he bundled foam into a pile and plastic into another. “What part of town are you living in? Got a backyard?”

“Downtown, about ten minutes' walk away from Noah's. We will have one, yeah.”

“Any interest in a hive in your yard?” Bill said, grinning.

“Er... I might have to think about that.”

Bill laughed. “It's legal and it's pretty easy. I'm always looking for spots to pawn off hives. If you put it facing a hedge and keep a water

buckets nearby, they aren't nuisances.”

Cameron didn't mind that idea, but he had to talk to Thomas and Jackson.

“I'll talk to my brothers about it first. We're buying houses together – three in a row.” Cameron bundled his first set of wrappings into a pile.

“Oh, that's unusual.” Bill brushed a bee off his hood and leaned in to look at his hives, then moved to the next pallet.

“Yeah, an investor who had them all wanted to sell them together, so we took it. It was a pretty good deal. Cheaper as a package than they each would've been on their own.”

“And you didn't fight over houses?”

“Not like fighting over bedrooms, nah,” Cameron grinned. “Each of us was drawn to a house. Theirs are more traditional and mine is a little weirder. Fitting.”

Bill chuckled. “Come here and see this hive.”

Cameron set down his pliers and approached, crouching next to Bill.

Bill pointed to the carpet of bees that blanketed the box around the entrance. “They're bearding.”

“Is that good?”

“Yeah. They're heading out to forage. First good, clear day, and they have more entrance access now. You can lean in closer and take a good look. See the ones watching you?”

It was hard to miss them. They watched Cameron and reared up on their hind legs, their front legs waving in his direction. “Er, yeah. Definitely.”

“They're guard bees. Each bee has a life cycle where she goes through a bunch of jobs according to her age. They start off cleaning out their own cell and so on. The last stage is foraging.”

Cameron smiled as he watched the bee waving her front legs at him. “So that's a warning?”

“Yeah. Those guards look out for animals--”

Cameron winced and said nothing.

“--or other bees, invaders from other hives.”

“They break in?”

“They’ll try,” Bill sighed. “So that’s something else to watch out for – battles happening at the entrances. We’ll see after we finish unwrapping whether they’re in danger. Then we’ll crack open a few hives and check them.”

Cameron nodded, rising to his feet to resume ripping off the outer winter coverings of the hives. It was early days, but there was something satisfying about this job.

A quarter of the hives were dead. Cameron’s heart fell, and even Bill was solemn. He better understood Noah’s emotions yesterday – grief as well as guilt. The bees were somehow... vulnerable, despite how tough everyone seemed to think they were.

It made him want to protect them.

Much better were the ones where Bill cracked the top open and bees came up to peek up at them, raising their front legs in warning.

Cameron leaned in, smiling at a row of bees peeking up at him. “Hello,” he greeted. “I’m new around here. Be nice to me.” He didn’t see Bill’s smile, but he felt his approving glance.

“It’s been a while since I’ve worked with anyone who cared about them as more than just money,” Bill told him.

“Why didn’t Noah stay around?”

“Oh, he was never interested,” Bill told him. “In a job, anyway. He likes it as a hobby and he’s a good man – he helps without complaint when I need it. But I can tell it isn’t his passion.”

“Art is.”

“Art is,” Bill echoed.

They smiled over their shared understanding of Bill’s nephew, Cam’s boyfriend.

Then, Bill settled the lid back on the hive and they rose to inspect the next one together.

---

The afternoon was long, the evening light lingering until late this time of year. Cam had just changed out of his bee suit and was climbing into his car.

His phone rang and he frowned, keeping his car running but not

pulling away yet. "Yeah?" he answered.

"Cameron?"

"Yeah, that's me." Cameron raised his hand to wave to Bill as he pulled away past him in the opposite direction.

"This is Jonathon Field. I'd like to have a chat with you about the New Brunswick minor league team that's forming."

Cameron dragged a hand down his face. He hadn't gotten stings, but it was still rough physical work. He was hungry and he wasn't in the mood for fucking journalists. "I'm leaving hockey. I've left."

"Where are you going to live, then? I heard you're living in New Brunswick, and there's rumors that you can play at home now."

Cameron gave a huff of irritation. "Coach Walker gave a statement last week, didn't he? Saying I left hockey. That still applies."

"A lot of people wonder about that. I mean, it's terrible about your medical condition, but a lot of teams were vying for you before that happened. It's not unthinkable that one could privately fund treatment and training. They could make you the surprise star of the new team. Then draft you for the major leagues after the first season..."

"I'm out. Do you have an actual question?" Cameron snapped, more venomously than he'd meant.

"Are you going to quit your passion so easily? A lot of people think--"

"You know what? Fuck off." Cameron hung up and shoved his phone into the cup holder, then pulled away from the curb.

He wasn't usually one to swear at them, but there was nothing they could do to him anymore. Coach Walker said the story had already broken in the sports section of the papers. Cameron hadn't read them, and he didn't intend to.

"I'm gonna quit my passion whenever I fuckin' want, thanks," he muttered under his breath. He rumbled along the back country road, home and supper the only things on his mind.

## Cameron

Saturday afternoon was cloudy, but at least it stayed dry and the hockey court was clear. Cameron appreciated not being soaked during practice. Even in field drills, he'd never learned to embrace the cooling rain.

"Cam, off for a bit," Kevin called out, gesturing for Justin to take his place instead. "Justin."

Cam frowned as he trotted off the court. More guys were here now – almost enough for proper lines – and Kevin had been swapping him back and forth all game. At first, Cameron thought Kevin wanted him to play hard or else get off the court. Now, as he crouched near the fence with the other two guys who were off, he realized that Noah was probably behind this.

Thursday, Friday, and even this morning had been filled with beekeeping. Cameron enjoyed working hard, but he hadn't seen Noah much since their talk about his heart condition. Noah might be worried for him.

He checked his watch. Only ten minutes left in the game.

When Kevin gestured for him to come back on the court and replace an exhausted Lonnie five minutes later, Cameron was sharp and focused.

This was his chance to prove himself.

He ducked into the fray without hesitation. Straight away, he snaked his stick around the blade of a defense player and flicked the ball away to Kevin.

Kevin took the pass and dodged Noah while Cam spun around George and avoided his fierce stick work. When Kevin passed back to Cam, Cam was already waiting at a forty-degree angle to the net. Matt, the goalie, *always* left a gap there.

The ball barely grazed his blade before he flicked it into the corner of the net. Blue, who'd been reffing since he was sixteen, called the goal.

Easy as pie.

The second goal took a few minutes longer: he had to fight harder against George. The guy had a way of always being right where Cam needed to be. Still, Cam barely broke a sweat as he and Kevin drove through the defense line to score again.

Cam got the sense time was ticking down, so he kept his body and stick in the way of the best angle for Noah to pass up the court. Blue yelled, "Game over."

"Whoa. You two," Noah breathed out, glancing back and forth between Kevin and Cameron. The guys came up behind them to slap their backs and bump their chests.

"Great work--"

"Holy shit, you two were on fire--"

"Well done--"

Even Matt came up to fist-bump them both, especially Cameron. "Nice, man."

Cameron indulged himself for a moment in a smile, even if he knew it had hardly been a fair fight. With Kevin and him on the same team, they hadn't even stood a chance: 6-2.

"I'll have to put you on the other team from now on," Kevin teased Cam, new respect in his eyes. He looked almost suspicious. "You been practicing?"

Cameron shook his head. "Just stretching my legs."

"Yeah, yeah, showoff," Justin laughed from nearby, and even Noah chuckled.

Everyone piled off the court, dropping off sticks or carrying their gear to the car and bantering.

Noah came up next to Cameron and squeezed his arm. "You doing all right?"

"I'm not gonna pass out," Cameron told Noah. "I wanted to show you – my health's fine. Between bee yard work and field hockey, I can manage it. I can't, like, run marathons anymore... but I can do *this*. I'm sure of it."

He hadn't even had a dizzy spell, though the court wasn't large enough and the competition wasn't skilled enough to keep an "elevated heart rate" and put him in danger.



God, he was hating that phrase.

"I just... don't want to get the guys' hopes up," Cameron murmured, his voice lower as he slid both his and Noah's sticks into his backseat. He perched on the bumper for a moment and Noah stood in front of him.

"Why?"

Cameron's eye was drawn by a guy in a car just on the other side of the lot – sitting in the driver's seat, scribbling. "Hey, that one of your artists?"

Noah got a funny expression on his face. "No. Kevin, uh, just pulled me aside during the break to tell me he went up to the guy and make sure he wasn't some perv."

"Oh, God. Is he?"

"No, he's... he got a call the other day asking about our best players. And this guy asked if someone had been in touch yet to ask about players. We're thinking scouts."

Cameron's brows shot up. "Why didn't you tell me?" Noah gave him a pointed look: they'd been playing hockey, not sitting around gossiping. "Sorry."

Noah shrugged it off. "But yeah. There's some rumor of another team forming or whatever."

Cameron rubbed his chin and leaned down to get a proper sight of the guy. He didn't recognize him, but the interior of the car was dark on this gloomy day. The car was dark blue too, a station wagon of some kind.

He couldn't shake the suspicion that something wasn't as it seemed. Was this a reporter? "Well, I'm not gonna get scouted, don't worry," he snorted lightly, but Noah didn't seem as amused as he did.

"Right," Noah nodded.

*If he finds out I quit the team, though... I don't want him thinking I'm some loser who runs away when the going gets tough. When the cup's on the line. Cameron licked his lips. Which I am.*

It had been too long since he'd felt Noah's bare skin under his. Cameron let out a breath, trying to forget about everything. "Wanna go back to your place?"

Noah let out a breath, like he'd been waiting to be asked. "Sure. I'll

just tell the guys I'm gone.”

Cameron raised a hand to wave to the guys still milling around and climbed into the driver's seat. When he glanced to the left again for one more look, the dark blue station wagon was gone.

---

They barely made it in through Noah's front door, kissing all the way up the stairs. Both Cameron and Noah tumbled into bed together, limbs tangled and smiles on their lips.

Cameron rolled on top of Noah and kissed him hard, grinding against him as Noah grabbed his ass to pull him in closer. They both moaned through the kiss, and then Cameron pulled away to grab lubricant and a condom.

Noah tossed his head, his eyes wild as he stripped and then yanked Cameron's clothing off.

When they were naked together, Noah wrapped his hand around both of their cocks to stroke a few times. Cameron rolled his head back, thrusting lazily against the firm, stiff flesh. Noah squeezed his hand around the heads and Cameron groaned his appreciation.

“I want us to get tested soon,” Noah murmured, pressing a kiss to Cameron's neck.

“So we can do it bareback?”

Noah nodded, pulling back to look at Cam. “That cool?”

Cameron didn't mind condoms as much as some guys, but having one less step before sex? That made him shiver with pleasure. “Yeah. Let me know when.”

“A'ight,” Noah murmured, his lips busy with Cameron's earlobe. His tongue and lips were doing things that made Cameron's thighs clench and quiver.

Cameron pulled back from Noah's hold on his cock and knelt between his legs, pouring lube over his fingers and pushing them in. He wanted to make Noah squirm with need. His own need for penetration was almost unbearable.

*So gorgeous.*

Noah's back arched, his stomach pushing into the air and chest heaving. His toes curled into the bed and fingers clenched around his

own thighs as he pulled them apart...

In certain small moments, Cameron fell for Noah all over again.

He shook his head to clear it and slid his fingers out.

“Nnh,” Noah moaned his complaint. “You're fuckin' good at that.”

Cameron grinned. “You wanna come just from fingering? When you've got a cock right here?”

“Good point,” Noah whispered, trying to catch his breath. He flattened against the bed again. “I just want it on record.”

“Noted.”

When he pushed the condom-covered tip into the warm tightness, Noah's spine arched again. Cameron slid one hand into the small of his back to support him, leaning over him to press their lips together. Inch by inch, he slid into Noah.

“I'm good,” Noah whispered when Cameron's balls brushed Noah's warm skin. “Cam... Fuck me.”

Cameron gripped Noah's shoulder hard and slid his other hand down to Noah's hip to hold him in place for the familiar rhythm of fast, desperate, hot sex. If Noah wanted him hard and deep, that was exactly what he'd give him.

Noah rolled his head into the pillow and groaned. He grabbed Cameron's ass to force him all the way in with each thrust.

*Demanding little bastard today*, Cameron thought with a grin. He leaned in to kiss around Noah's lips. He propped himself on his elbow to let his lips trail down Noah's neck and collarbone, then back up to his ear. Noah quivered as he sucked around his neck and shoulder.

With each pounding thrust of his hips, he squeezed into Noah and past his prostate. Noah trembled and squirmed – slightly, at first, then harder. Their bodies rubbed together, bare skin burning skin as Noah moaned.

“C-Cam--” Noah whispered, his voice hoarse.

Cameron pulled back enough to murmur, “Yeah?”

“You wanna jerk me off?”

*I'd love to.* Cameron grinned as he was entrusted with all of Noah's pleasure. He braced himself on his forearm and reached between their bodies to curl his fingers around the sensitive, stiff cock. The velvety

weight in his hand twitched when he grabbed it, so he kept his first few strokes light before firming his grip.

Noah barely needed that adjustment time. "Yes...!" he groaned, clenching subconsciously around Cameron's cock. He shivered in a series of squeezes that milked Cameron's cock. Cameron barely hung on. His muscles burned for release, his head spinning and heart pounding.

*Extended periods of elevated heart rates, my ass.*

They rutted together and moaned each other's names with sexual desperation into the quiet air.

Seconds later, Noah's cock pulsed in Cameron's hand. He squirted his load across his own stomach, arching off the bed and pushing his hips into Cameron's cock. Noah fucked himself as deep as he could on Cameron.

Cameron kept stroking and pounding Noah for a few seconds before letting go of Noah's cock. He grabbed Noah's hip to push into him one or two last times. Then, blackness hit and he couldn't hold out a second longer: he came in a burst of heat. All that registered was utter focus on Noah's pleasure-twisted face and sweating, slender, gorgeous body.

Heat poured from deep within and pooled in his stomach, his muscles quivering and clenching. Noah pulled him off-balance and down against him to kiss him hard, and Cameron moaned against Noah's lips. He was so oversensitive, but Noah sucked on his lower lip and ran his nails down his bare back and he loved it.

"Holy fuck," Cameron whispered when he could pant for breath and his cock softened. He pulled out of Noah but Noah wouldn't let him get away until he'd kissed him thoroughly.

Cameron finally rolled onto his side and then his back to catch his breath. Noah stayed on his back next to him rather than following to cuddle into his side.

They were silent for a minute or two, Cameron's hand lightly tangled with Noah's as his body cooled off. When he rolled his head over to watch Noah, his gaze flickered along Noah's parted lips and half-closed eyes, noting the way he stared at the ceiling.

Something odd and distant was in his expression but Cam didn't think it was the moment to discuss it. It just... looked familiar in a way he didn't want to think about. But Noah was lying here with him, holding

hands and sometimes squeezing Cameron's fingers... Nathan had only wanted to fuck fast and hard in a vicious cycle of whatever the fuck they'd had between them.

This was different in every way.

"I wanna do *that* again," Noah murmured at last.

Cameron chuckled. *As long as that's not all we do.* His stomach twisted with brief anxiety before he let it go. Cameron raised Noah's hand to his lips to brush his lips across his fingers.

Noah slid his hand onto Cameron's chest and closed his eyes. Cameron watched Noah's expression clear up as he grew sluggish and contented. *I want to make love to him.*

Noah

"All week, I've been waiting for this," Noah sighed. He tapped his foot as he leaned against the side door of the arena, raising a hand to squint across the parking lot. "And now look."

Jason was supposed to be here to give him the key to the arena lobby, open the Zamboni door to bring the steel sculpture in, and supervise its installation. Everything else could be carried by hand the day before the show.

Jason was infamously bad at keeping appointments. Now Jackson was going to be here any minute with his sculpture and equipment for moving it and no way to get it inside.

At the same time, Noah was fielding calls from artists who were interested in the August charity show. He'd stupidly put the word out on a local mailing list that morning before leaving the house. His phone rang again.

"Hi, Noah. It's Chase."

*Chase...?* Right: the tattoo artist who'd painted a series of ten hockey pucks and stuck them together with needles into a mural. God, Noah loved that piece. "Yeah, hi. What's up?"

"I forgot – is the opening next Saturday or Sunday?"

"The reception is Saturday evening. We're doing art installation and setup on Friday. Why?"

"Okay, phew. That works. Just making sure," Chase answered. "I've got appointments on Sunday and I about had a heart attack there."

Noah winced and swallowed. "Yeah. No problem. See you Friday, right?"

"Friday." Chase promised and hung up.

Jason's pickup truck crunched into the gravel side lot, then over to the paved section. Noah raised a hand to wave Jason over.

As he'd expected, Jason jumped out of the truck and practically sprinted over to him. "Sorry I'm late. Everything all right?"

“Good. Jackson's supposed to be here in – oh, I think that's him.” Noah waved over to the pickup truck that was turning into the main lot, gesturing it over. The truck came around the side of the building toward them.

“Just in time, then,” Jason declared and strode for the side door to unlock it. He stepped in to roll up the bay door.

Noah let himself glare at the door for a moment before he forced a pleasant expression again. He didn't mind Jason, but untimeliness was one of his pet peeves. It was disrespectful of both his time and Jackson's.

“There we are,” Jason nodded as he waved Jackson's truck into the arena.

“Hey,” Jackson greeted from his rolled-down window. He backed up past Noah, his eyes flickering between the mirrors.

“Hi. You got what you need?” The load was covered by a large tarp and a lot of bungee cords, so it was hard to tell.

“Yep.” Jackson stopped once the back end of the pickup was inside, then yanked the parking brake on and climbed out. He clapped Noah's shoulder. “Excited?”

“Very!” Noah grinned. “You didn't even let me see it past the halfway point.”

“Yeah. It's – I'm happy with it.” Jackson strode around to the back of the pickup truck, pulling down the gate. “Got the loader?”

“It's through this way,” Jason told Jackson. They strode off for it while Noah waited by the pickup truck. He heard them talking about how their days were going, traffic, and football season, so he let them be.

A few minutes later, the small vehicle returned with a helmet-clad Jackson at the wheel. Jason walked behind it. “Either of you trained at this?”

Noah and Jason both shook their heads.

“No problem.” Jackson opened the door and clambered down to the ground, then up into the bed of the pickup. “Just keep back, then.”

Noah shifted anxiously as Jackson unfastened the bungee cords and straps, coiling everything up and tossing it all to the ground out of the way. Then, the tarp came off.

The steel sculpture glistened from inside its wood crate, and Noah rose

onto his tiptoe to try to see.

“Not until it's ready,” Jackson scolded him with a grin and shouldered him out of the way.

Noah laughed. “Fine,” he lamented. “I'll go wait in the lobby.” He strode away from the truck down the back hallway of the arena and the front lobby. It took him a minute to find door wedges to keep the doors open.

He'd seen this place a hundred times in his sketches and at least a dozen in person while planning the exhibit. The lighting would all have to be changed out, and extra lighting added in several places. There was only one place for the sculpture: the middle of the lobby. Noah firmly believed a sculpture should never be against a wall, and this was the show centerpiece. Good – the pedestal he'd had delivered last week was already set up.

The loader rumbled its way into the room, bearing the massive crate on its metal prongs.

“Where to?” Jackson asked, and Noah indicated the middle of the room. “Really?”

Noah nodded. “You cool with that?”

“More than cool,” Jackson laughed. He pivoted the loader as he entered the room, his eyes narrowed in focus. Once he maneuvered the prongs into position, he set down the crate. “I'll use the hand truck to get it off the pallet. Perfect, the pedestal's the right height.”

“It's almost like we coordinated it.”

They worked together, Noah directing Jackson to maneuver and twist the sculpture until it faced the right way. Then, slowly, the sculpture was eased into place on the pedestal and set down. Jackson unwrapped the plastic around it once that was done and stood back, folding his arms.

“Now can I look?”

“Turn on the lights first.”

Noah laughed and flipped on the overhead light switches. When he turned around, light glimmered off steel and bronze, bringing it to life in a way even he hadn't anticipated.

“See?” Jackson smugly stated. He hauled the pallet back onto the loader before leaning against it and folding his arms. Despite his self-confidence, Noah could tell he was waiting for the final assessment.



Noah paced around it, admiring the smooth, burnished curves. It showed a hockey player caught in mid-stride. One skate was slightly off the ice, the puck delicately balanced on the edge of the stick's blade...

The face was familiar, too.

“Oh my God, you used Cam.”

The model's open face mask framed Cam's distinctive chiseled jaw and narrow cheekbones, strong and slightly crooked nose, thin but full lips...

Cameron was breathtaking in bronze and steel. Noah swallowed back his emotion as his chest tightened. Was that what he looked like when he'd played on the ice? This was far more focus than he'd seen even on the hockey court last week. The sculpture's lifelike eyes even subtly narrowed in focus on a distant point.

Noah was spellbound by Jackson's skill. This showed his boyfriend's passion, elegance, and strength all at once.

He just wished he'd been able to see that in person.

So why the hell hadn't Cam wanted Noah to know about that part of him?

## Cameron

The next time Cameron saw a dark blue station wagon, he had its number.

He and Bill were working at the corner lot again that sunny Saturday afternoon. They tidied up hives and finished sorting out the mess the bear had left in the bee yard. There was no reason that station wagon ought to be there, except...

"Excuse me. I'll be back in a minute, sorry."

Bill nodded and Cam set down his smoker. He strode down the length of the bee yard, through the trees, and out to the road.

The man behind the wheel was startled to be directly approached, but rolled down the window. "Hello?" He looked a few years older than Cam. He had dark stubble across his jaw, pale pink lips, and eyes that were a soft, enchanting brown. His brows were thin, dark, and low, but he looked like a goddamn model. He could get information anywhere.

Cam had no patience for the act. "Unless you want a lot of bees in your car, tell me why you've been watching me."

The man scanned his expression for a few moments. He rubbed his face and set aside the notebook Cameron wanted to pry out of his hand. "There's no point in bullshitting you, is there?"

"Nope."

"I'm Alex. I've been asked to set up a meeting between you and a few people who want to meet you."

Cameron took a certain pleasure in seeing a few little bees crawling in through the window. He had the sneaking suspicion he knew what this was about, but he leaned back to give Alex a skeptical look. "When and where?"

"This afternoon, if possible. At the Park hotel downtown. Room 341. Say, two o'clock?"

That was a fancy-ass place for a meeting, and right next to the art

gallery. Cam glanced back at the bee yard. They were just about done there, and if he explained the situation to Bill, he was sure he'd be sent home anyway. "Fine. I'll be there. Stop watching me." He strode through the trees again for the yard.

The car pulled away after he walked off,

By the time he made it back to the field, Bill was watching him. "What was that about? Someone want to talk to you?"

"Yeah. I have... my old bosses, sort of, breathing down my neck."

Bill eyed him for a moment before nodding. "If you need to leave at lunchtime..."

"If I can, that'd be great, yeah."

"Should be fine. I just have some painting to do this afternoon. I've seen that car around before, too. Nearly called the cops on it once."

Cameron's eyes narrowed. "I know. He's been watching me for a bit. Says his name is Alex – ring any bells?"

"Sorry, Cam. Lots of "Alex"s around here your age."

Cameron nodded and drew a breath. When he let it go, he cleared his mind of thoughts. "Let's get back to checking hives."

By lunchtime, he had some guesses about who it was and what they wanted. He didn't have any kind words for any of the possibilities.

He changed at Jackson's home and showered, grabbing a bite to eat. Jackson had been out almost day and night for the last few weeks, they saw each other only a few evenings a week now. That was another stressor, but he didn't have time to worry about that.

Cameron arrived at the hotel a couple minutes before the hour and headed up in the elevator.

He knocked firmly on the door of room 341. When it opened, the man who answered seemed unsurprised to see him. The gray-haired older guy was wearing a suit jacket in the kind of style that screamed "team owner".

"Afternoon," Cameron greeted. "I'm Cameron Riley."

"Darren Kolusky. Owner of the--"

"Florida. I know."

Darren raised his eyebrows and nodded. "Well done. Yes. And that's

Henry Thibeault, the New Brunswick team manager. Come on inside.”

Cameron firmed his jaw as he strode into the small hotel room. Three chairs were pulled cozily together. “Alex isn't here? Who's he to you?”

“Oh, he was just a private eye. We needed someone to see if you were around here.”

A muscle in Cameron's jaw twitched. He remained calm and sank into one of the three seats while Darren and Henry followed suit.

“We're here to make you an offer. From what Walker told us, you've been expecting this for a while. And you're right to expect it – you were inches away from being drafted.”

“I know.” Cameron watched both men.

Henry cleared his throat. “We're getting a great team together. There's a lot of talent here in the Atlantic provinces. Guys are getting tired of flying out to Toronto, Montreal, even St. John's, and that's just for home games. When you're not on the road, you want to be truly home.”

“The spiel's good, but you can save it for the other guys,” Cameron told them. “You've been following me around with a frigging private detective.”

Darren held up a hand to Henry and nodded. “Here's the thing. All the papers say you suddenly quit, but then you wind up back here. You're keeping your skills sharp in the only quiet local venue you can. Our thought was this: you're hoping to get back into the game soon.”

“I'm not playing damn games trying to pretend I wasn't drafted. That's all public knowledge,” Cameron snorted. “If I had been, it'd be all over the internet by now.”

“Right. But a gentleman's agreement under the table, in effect as soon as your heart's fixed...”

Cameron narrowed his eyes. “It'll take a specialist and probably surgery to fix. Ablation, they said. A wait list.”

“Or you can go private, if you have a team willing to pay. We would. I bet Toronto offered.”

“They looked. They couldn't find anyone.”

“We know someone in Florida who will.”

Cameron tightened his jaw. “And after that, there's no guarantee I'll be

in fit condition to play.”

“Kid,” Henry told him, “look at the offer. No strings attached surgery, and if it works, you join us.”

“You'll draft me after a season,” Cameron told them, boldly jutting his jaw. “I'm that good, and that's why you're so interested. How can pulling me to Florida get me closer to home?”

Henry shifted and glanced at Darren.

Darren chuckled. “Walker was right: you take no shit. Listen, you're smart. You know we get on well with Toronto. There's a trade or two we're looking at, and if we can give them something they want...”

“You get something – or someone – you want,” Cameron nodded. “Like Matty?”

“Among others.”

Cameron breathed out. *This isn't how I wanted my new life to go. Being traded, traveling all over the damn continent again...*

“If money and fame isn't enough, we can do a lot. We can set you up with a good-looking new boyfriend. If that's your concern, it's not a problem with us. The team's willing to accept it. Don't quit your passion over it.”

*How nice of them.* Cameron's jaw tightened. Fuck them for trying to replace Noah with some underwear model.

“A guy your age will have a lot of fun off the ice if he's willing to put everything into his game on the ice.”

Cameron shook his head. “And I'm not. My family needs me – my new boyfriend, who you *can't* just replace with some Armani model, needs me.”

“If you had surgery tomorrow and you woke up fit to play again, can you say you'd walk away?”

That was Henry, his gaze knowing as he watched Cameron.

The bastard already knew the answer. Cameron hated it. He wanted the answer to be yes, but... This tactic wouldn't work.

“I'm not signing up.”

“We called Gavin.” His old agent. Cameron hadn't minded the guy, but he'd been canny. “He told us you might take a good offer.”

"Then he didn't know me. What did Walker say?"

Neither of them said anything.

"That's what I thought." Cameron rose to his feet. "Thanks for meeting me, but that was a colossal waste of time and money. If you want a star heading your team, get your ass to Toronto. There's half a dozen great guys that only need another season under someone like Coach Walker. Make your own stars."

Henry and Darren rose, too. "Is that your decision?"

"Yeah."

"If you change your mind..."

Cameron's vision went wavy around the edges. He interrupted, "I'll talk to the team that didn't hire a fuckin' *detective* to stalk me."

He hated burning bridges, especially with how fucking badly he wanted to be on the ice. Yet he couldn't let them use that as leverage.

He bit back the worst of his vitriol to be calm and polite on his way out. "Thank you for the meeting. Good luck with the team."

"Good luck with your new life," Henry answered, walking him to the door.

Cameron strode down the hall without a backward glance. His hands were curled into tight fists to keep his self-control.

That went about as well as he'd expected, and he *had* to calm down *now*.

It was the last thought he remembered. He stepped out of the elevator into the lobby and smooth marble flew into his face.

---

When Cameron opened his eyes, the sterile whiteness around him was the second thing to register.

The first was a warm hand in his own, fingers laced with his, and a murmuring voice. "--many months now?"

"About six weeks. It's an urgent referral."

"Good." That was Noah's voice. "Three months or more is unacceptable when he's fainting in public."

Cameron stirred slightly and rolled his head to the side as strength

returned again. His heart rate was back to normal. He was dressed in a weird paper gown and he had those fucking sticky patches on his chest. Damn it, he was going to rip off circles of his own chest hair again.

"Hello," Noah greeted him with a little smile. "Fancy meeting you here."

He wasn't panicking or freaking out. Noah looked calmer than Cameron felt. He sat up with confidence as he faced the doctor.

Cameron blinked and nodded. "Hi."

"Hello. I'm Dr. Smith. I was discussing your referral with your, er--"

"My boyfriend, Noah, yeah," Cameron said. He cleared his throat and blinked as he sat up slowly, licking his lips. "And?"

"Yes. And you're being bumped up the waitlist. I expect it'll be about a month, six weeks at the outside. As soon as possible given your condition."

Cameron glanced at Noah, wondering how much of a role he had in that decision. "Oh. Oh, that's great."

"Noah explained some of the difficulties you've been facing, and we looked over your file and your activity level. You're unlikely to reduce your physical activity much. And it's obviously impractical to just *not* stress about anything at all for months on end."

"Yeah."

"Right. A nurse will be by in a few minutes to do some tests. I want to make sure you're clear to go and assess whether we need to keep you any longer."

Cameron nodded and lay back again. "Thanks, Dr. Smith."

The doctor strode out and they were alone. Beeps and babbling of voices in the background filled the air beyond the soft curtains of the emergency room space.

Cam took in Noah sitting in a chair next to his bed, still holding his hand. "How are you?"

"A lot better than you," Noah teased with a gentle smile. "You?"

"I... I didn't tell you everything," Cameron said before he stopped himself.

"So I gather. Want to tell me now?"

"Please," Cameron murmured with a nod. "I'm here because my heart condition benched me, then got me to quit the team completely. I played pro hockey in the minor leagues in Toronto. I was about to be drafted. Then this thing developed, and they couldn't diagnose it. I just... quit." He pressed his tongue against the inside of his cheek, then ran it along his teeth as he looked away. His stomach twisted into a knot of fear when Noah let go of his hand. *I shouldn't have hidden it all.*

Noah's hand pressed against his cheek to turn his face toward him.

Cameron blinked, then shifted onto his side to face Noah.

"I don't blame you," Noah said, his voice quiet but clear. There was no hint of a lisp now. Was this his curator voice? "It's life-changing. The doctor said they don't know if you even *can* play after they fix... whatever's going on. The team can't keep you on under those conditions."

"But they were willing to try. I walked away."

Now Noah's lisp came out as he clicked his tongue against his teeth and rolled his eyes to the ceiling for patience. "You were forced off the ice. I'm glad you didn't kill yourself out of some hyper-macho bullshit weakness complex."

Cameron's jaw dropped. After a second of staring at Noah, all he could do was laugh. "Don't hold back."

"I'm serious," Noah insisted. "If you'd died on the ice, I would never have met you. So you better not get yourself fuckin' killed over it. And next time, tell me about things that are important to you. Don't assume I'll apply the same bullshit macho standards to you that you apply to yourself."

*Ouch.* Cameron laughed again and closed his eyes as he rolled his head back to stare up at the ceiling. "Okay."

"Good," Noah chirped in that adorable upbeat voice that always made Cameron smile.

Cameron's fingers tingled: Noah's hand slid into his own again. This time, Cameron squeezed hard, and Noah squeezed back.



Noah

"I don't think I can play against Moncton."

Noah wasn't even a little surprised to hear Cam say that. It had taken him three days to work up the courage. Since being sent home from the hospital that same afternoon on Saturday, Cameron had had a lot on his mind. Even going to get tested and getting clean results together hadn't broken his funk.

Last night, Cameron had skipped their usual Tuesday evening hockey practice, and he was no doubt guilty about that.

All Noah could do was give him time to get through it.

"No problem," Noah said. They leaned into one another on Noah's living room couch. "Neither can I."

"What?"

Noah bit back a smile at Cameron's shock. "Not every guy can or wants to to play in them, you know." The thought clearly hadn't even occurred to Cam. "That charity show I'm doing in August is on the same day – same time, even."

"Oh. I never realized..."

Noah chuckled and ruffled Cameron's short hair. "I know. You've been wrapped up in your own issue, and that's understandable. It's good, even. Better than trying to ignore it."

Cameron groaned. "I wasn't ignoring it..."

"You were just putting yourself into stressful situations to prove you could beat it, right?" Noah teased, and Cameron's blush made him laugh.

"Stop being my fuckin' psychologist. I've had a sport one before. I hated it."

Noah laughed. "Okay. But you can just agree to help me out with the charity event – or be my plus-one. I'll tell the team I can't do it and... you know, maybe step back from organizing a little. All I wanted to do was play."

"Mm," Cameron nodded. "But you have to organize everything around you, don't you? You'll get physical pains if you don't."

It was Noah's turn to be taken aback, then laugh. "True. I'll talk about it with Kevin."

They sat in silence for a few more moments, watching a yogurt commercial. By unspoken agreement, they both leaned in at the same moment to press a kiss to each other's lips.

After a minute of gentle kisses, Noah's body pressed into Cameron's muscular side, Noah pulled back. "Still coming to the hockey exhibition Saturday?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world."

Noah patted Cameron's chest lightly. "Good. Hey, I know the doctor said to keep vigorous sexual exertion to a couple times a week--"

"Now that was just bullshit," Cameron grumbled.

--but what if I did the exertion for you?" Noah teased, sidling over Cameron's lap to straddle it. He leaned in to press a kiss to Cameron's lips, then his collarbone and neck and chest...

His knees hit the floor and his lips landed on the bulge in Cameron's jeans. Cameron already pushed up into Noah with soft, needy moans.

Noah knew the feeling: it had been a long week since their last hot and heavy moments together. They'd made out plenty, but they'd been too focused on everything else for sex. Cameron had been running around taking care of shit whenever Noah couldn't get him to sit still. The house was due to close tomorrow.

God, he loved sucking Cameron off.

Noah pulled Cameron's jeans down enough to slide Cam's thick cock out into the open air. He licked his lips pointedly and Cameron choked off a quiet sound in his throat.

*No holding back.* He leaned down to lick the thick length from base to tip and back down again. He enjoying the throbs of pleasure as it stiffened the rest of the way in his hand. Then, he closed his lips around the tip and sucked in the musk of Cameron's manhood as he bobbed his head down.

The thick, warm length in his mouth throbbed with need as Cameron moaned again and pushed his hips up.

Cameron's cock slid down to the back of his throat. Noah sucked and

darted his tongue along the underside of Cam's cock. He pulled his head back up to the tip and back down again, setting into a quick rhythm.

Noah loved it all: Cameron clenched and shivered. His thighs twitched and feet curled and hands dug into Noah's shoulders and hair...

Most of all, he loved the sounds. Cameron grunted and moaned with overwhelmed pleasure. His harsh breaths and the wet lapping of Noah's tongue against the shaft were a background track.

Cameron's balls drew tight in Noah's hand. His shaft swelled and Noah kept his head down to swallow the quick, strong jets that hit the back of his throat. He rubbed Cameron's thigh, gazing up at those intense eyes half-closed in ecstasy.

"Jesus, Noah," Cameron whispered, his voice hoarse. His hips settled back down and Noah pulled his lips up and off his cock. "Christ, you're good. And fast. And... good."

Watching all that had made Noah's dick so hard it hurt, but he was ready to take care of that himself.

Turned out he didn't have to.

Cameron pulled him up onto the couch until he lay flat on his back and crawled over him to kiss at his groin.

"Oh, fuck, Cam," Noah breathed out. He grabbed Cam's shoulders and squeezed hard. "You're hot when you're coming."

"Yeah?" Cameron murmured. He unzipped Noah's tight jeans, wiggling the fabric down. Noah's hard cock popped free and bobbed stiffly up in the air.

Then, Cameron attacked it, grabbing and stroking the length sensually. He leaned down to kiss the side of it and rub it against his bristly cheek, a sting that Noah *adored*.

"Christ!" Noah whimpered. His stomach tensed with hot, tight need. Then Cam's hot, wet mouth wrapped around the sensitive head of his cock. That tongue tapped against that certain sensitive spot... once, twice, three times, flickering back and forth across it.

Noah's hips bucked as his head pressed hard into the arm of the couch. "Fuck – oh, fuck, yes..."

Cameron moaned, the sound sending a little vibration of pleasure through Noah's whole body. Noah's fingertips buzzed with pleasure. His cheeks burned and he pushed up into Cameron's mouth.

His cock head rubbed against Cameron's palate and Cameron didn't protest for a moment. Cam sucked his cheeks and lips in tightly and bobbed his head down until he took all of Noah in.

Having his cock enveloped by Cameron's skilled mouth was one thing. Watching the pink length slide between Cameron's even pinker lips... And the way Cameron's looked up and down his shaft hungrily...

Noah throbbed and pushed up again, encouraging Cameron to get to work.

Cameron's lips sucked up and down the shaft. He rubbed the base now and then whenever he pulled his head up to focus on the sensitive head.

"Christ, I'm only gonna – Cam, fuck, watch out..."

Noah could hardly put words together. Cam's mouth on his cock was his whole world. He slammed his hips forward as his cock pulsed and throbbed and jetted out his sticky passion straight to the back of Cam's mouth.

He still tasted Cam, and Cam was eagerly swallowing him. The tip of Cam's tongue teased his slit until he *ached* with how hard his body throbbed.

"Cam, I – fuck, Cameron... you're..." Noah trailed off. Cameron pulled his head off his manhood with a quiet, slick *pop*. "You're perfect."

A half-loopy smile spread over Cameron's face. He scooted up the couch until he braced himself over Noah, then leaned down to kiss Noah.

Noah didn't care that they tasted themselves on each other's lips; he just wanted to share the moment with him. He wrapped his arms around Cameron and kissed him hard.

*I can't live without this man.* The thought made him catch his breath and kiss harder, until Cameron reached up to run his callused thumb along Noah's jaw like he was touching something precious.

Noah's tension melted, his eyes sliding closed as Cameron silently told him everything would be okay.

Cameron

With just three keys on it, the keyring was light, but its significance lent it weight in his palm. A quick look at Thomas and Jackson told him his brothers felt the same as they approached their houses.

“This is it. Those papers were it.”

Cameron elbowed Jackson. “Thanks, Captain Obvious.”

Even Thomas chuckled. “No, but... it's so weird. I've never *not* rented.”

Cameron and Jackson both looked at their younger brother, then each other. They nodded with an unspoken agreement: *He should be the first one.*

“Come on, you open up your house first.”

The moving truck behind them was on a clock, and they didn't have much time to be sentimental. Cameron was forced to stick to lighter boxes or sharing loads. Jackson and Thomas handled the heavier shit. It made him itch with frustration. Every time he wanted to push himself too far, though, Noah's words rang in his head: *hyper-macho bullshit weakness complex.*

Pretty accurate, even if it stung.

So Cameron took it slow as they moved Thomas in first, unloading his truck with the help of moving dollies. A few of Jackson's buddies showed up, followed by Noah and some guys from the hockey team, and Thomas's friends. People were free to come and go, but they'd promised food to anyone who stuck around to the end.

With eight of them, there were almost too many for one moving truck. They had the truck unloaded before noon. Then, they split into two groups to finish moving stuff from the sidewalk inside while the others loaded the truck with Cam's and Jackson's stuff. By the time they sent Cam for pizza, they were almost finished.

When Cam came back with a stack of four pizzas and a flat of pop, he heard them holler his name from the backyard, though he couldn't tell which.

He let himself through the side gate, then burst out laughing. A few boards had been kicked out from the fence between the three houses. "Did someone fall through or was that deliberate?" He ducked into Jackson's yard.

"Nah, that was on purpose."

"If you're sure you wanna be around my bees, then you're welcome to my yard," he winked as he set pizzas out on Jackson's lawn furniture.

"Bees?" Jackson exclaimed. "You want them at home?"

Cameron glanced over at Noah, who was glowing at him. "They've kinda won me over. Besides, they won't sting unless you're a dick to them. You can ask Bill – he's gonna be at the show on Saturday. Are you all going?"

"Duh, I'm going," Jackson snorted.

Cameron slapped the back of Jackson's head as he reached for a pop. "Well, duh. I didn't mean you, attention hog. Notice Noah didn't answer?" Jackson's buddies cracked up and he grinned at them. "The rest of you?"

"I am," Thomas promised. "I know Mom and Dad are, too."

"We might," Kevin added, raising a slice of pizza. "I heard it's quite a show." He exchanged looks with Noah.

As they settled into eating pizza and drinking pop, Cameron couldn't wipe the stupid grin off his face. These guys were a ragtag bunch, each of them friends with just one of the brothers, but it was a sign of things to come.

It was a new life for Cam to share with his brothers... and maybe someday soon, Noah.

As he glanced at his own house, then Noah, he caught his boyfriend gazing over there, too. He leaned in to murmur, "You should stay the night Saturday. Not 'til I have the place set up."

Noah pouted. "I gotta wait?"

"Yeah. I want things to be set up first," Cameron told him.

"I already saw inside."

"Not set up yet." Cameron reached out with a napkin to dab tomato sauce off Noah's cheek and licked off his own fingers. "Trust me."

"Fine," Noah groaned, but there were others groaning, too.

Cameron looked over at their buddies, then laughed at the faces they were all making. “Hey, if you're jealous, you can go get a love life of your own,” he teased them.

Thomas made a face. “I'll get right on that.”

Jackson just laughed, then elbowed him. “So where's the beer?”

“Hold on. I put it in your fridge.”

Cameron rose to his feet to grab the case of beer and bring it outside, his heart soaring. *What a weird goddamn month.* But summer was almost here, and it was gonna be a thousand times better.

Cameron

"You look gorgeous."

"You look like you belong on my gorgeous arm." Cameron grinned at Noah as he leaned against his freshly-washed car in the shadow of the arena. "Like a curator who's done incredibly against all odds and people who hate change."

Noah swatted Cameron's thigh and laughed. "Okay. The evening's already started. Come on in." He held out a hand for Cameron to take, then led him around to the front of the building.

Cam had been busy learning how to diagnose varroa mites until forty minutes ago, when he and Bill had realized the time. Bill hadn't arrived yet, but Cam had barely had time to shower, change, and wolf down a peanut butter sandwich. He'd broken a few speed limits on the way to the show.

"Don't look around until I tell you to."

So bossy. Cameron laughed and nodded. "I'll avert my gaze from anything you don't want me looking at. Except your ass. Those trousers--"

"Cam," Noah hissed, but he was laughing. He paused outside the door before he opened it to take Cameron in one more time as if memorizing his expression.

Cameron smiled and leaned in to peck Noah's lips, then past Noah to open the door. "Lead on, Mr. Clark."

"Keep your eyes to the left." Cameron obeyed and made his way to the wall where new and beautiful artwork hung.

One painting and sketch and mixed media piece at a time, Noah took him around the exhibition, explaining the significance of each piece. Cameron half-listened to his boyfriend – enough to answer a quiz about what he'd just said. Mostly, his attention was caught by the detail in each piece. It didn't make his heart ache as much as he'd thought to see these passionate representations of his sport.

Some pieces made him smile more than others. In particular, he loved



the series of watercolors from that local artist Noah had mentioned several times. It showed different hockey teams playing – university teams in the oh-so-familiar university stadium, local kids on the river, even their little club on the field.

He paused for a long time by a series of painted pucks, taking in each miniature scene carefully. They were intimate portraits behind the scenes – a locker room, a janitor picking up a popcorn box in the bleachers, a Zamboni driver climbing aboard... The pucks were joined together by thin, flexible needles, producing a story out of interconnected vignettes.

“You like that one?” Noah asked, finally catching Cameron's attention.

“Yeah. A lot,” Cameron admitted. There was another guy standing next to Noah in a short-sleeved black collared shirt and trousers, his arms covered with full-length tattoo sleeves. “Wow, nice tats.”

“This is Chase, the artist who did them.”

“Wow. Nice,” Cam whistled, glancing between Chase and the pucks. “I really like this, man.”

Chase glowed with pride at the compliment and reached out to shake hands. “Cam, right? I've heard a lot about you.”

“Jesus, I'm not that late, am I? Should I sneak out the side door?” Cam grinned.

Chase laughed. “Nah. Your big brother had a lot to say about you. And Noah...”

“I bet they did,” Cameron laughed. “It's all lies.” His eye was caught by the short *about the artist* bio. “Wait, you're a tattoo artist?”

“Yep.”

“And you paint?” Chase gave him a look and Cameron winced after a moment. “Sorry – I didn't mean to imply you can only do one or the other.” Jackson clapped his arm. “Hey,” he added.

Chase relaxed again and chuckled. “No, it's fine. A lot of people don't figure I would. But I have to know art to freehand.” He smiled and nodded at Jackson as Jackson approached.

“No, I understand. I've never gotten a tattoo, but now I know who to go to,” Cameron nodded. Noah's hand slipped into his own, and he glanced at his boyfriend. “Is this one for sale?”

“To the right person, it might be,” Noah winked, exchanging glances

with Chase.

“Oh, yeah,” Chase agreed. “This isn't one of the pieces they're keeping.”

Jackson shook his head. “They ought to. I mean, I want it, but it's good enough to stay here, too...”

Noah cleared his throat. “No, I think they're happy with their choice. The only thing here left for you to see... is Jackson's piece.”

“Wait, they're buying yours? Great work,” Cameron grinned at his big brother, reaching out for a manly half-hug and back slap. “Do I get to see it?”

“Turn around,” Noah invited and let go of his hand.

When he spun around, Cameron wasn't even sure what he was seeing at first. The bronze and steel sculpture was so fluid and smooth that he knew it was his brother's work. It seemed to have been poured molten into a mold instead of hand-shaped by long hours at the forge.

It was a hockey player skating hard, his back foot up as if he were about to push his foot in and halt in a spray of ice. Cam could tell the puck danced on the edge of his blade, ready to fly into the upper corner of the net...

And it was him.

Cameron's jaw dropped.

“That's the same face you made,” Jackson teased Noah in the background. Cameron ignored him and walked closer to the piece.

It was large as life, the stick a glimmering silvery steel while his face was bronze. The jersey was a loose practice jersey, each tiny hole imprinted in the metal. It made him want to tug the hem just to make sure it was solid.

“I was planning on modeling it after you from the start, but then after everything... I especially thought it should be,” Jackson murmured, coming up beside Cameron to look up at it. “You like it?”

Cameron barely had words. He nodded and squeezed Jackson in a hard hug instead, the air rushing out of his big brother's lungs.

Jackson squeezed him back with those blacksmiths' arms, a game he always won. He slapped Cam's back. “Love you, bro',” he muttered into Cam's ear and pulled back before the moment was *too* sappy.

“You, too.” Chase was still lingering and watching with a broad smile.

Jackson nodded to Cam and strode off to join Chase and talk about tattoos. He was clearly on a high from Cameron's approval and hiding it as much as a cuddly, over-excitably hothead could. He clapped Chase's back now and pointed out spots on his arm, then Chase's. Was he thinking of getting a tattoo?

Noah grabbed Cameron's attention when he took Cam's hand again. “So, that's the main attraction.”

“That's... that's stunning,” Cameron told him. “I can't believe you made me wait until the end of your tour to see it! Is Jackson gonna be all right?”

Noah laughed. “I think so. He's been waiting for your reaction for freakin' months now is all. Chase will help cool him off.”

Cameron laughed. “That's... That's so cool.”

They'd already met most of their friends and family, but there was someone new approaching: an older guy in a suit. He nudged Noah.

“Oh, hi, Frank.”

*Frank... Oh, right. The asshole on the board of directors who Noah thinks was the one dragging his heels.* Cameron smiled lightly, glancing between them. Frank had played for Montreal two decades ago, and he thought it gave him a name in Fredericton. Maybe it did – Frank had come to talk to his junior and senior teams about the life of a pro hockey player.

“Congratulations, Noah. This is a great exhibit.”

“Thanks. You like how it turned out?”

“I had my doubts,” Frank admitted. Cameron could tell Noah was resisting the urge to punch Cam in the arm and hiss, *Told you so*. It absolutely *had* been him dragging his heels. “But the way it came together... it works. It'll be a great show for the next month, and keeping this around just seemed fitting. It was a unanimous vote on buying it.”

“Oh, Jackson's gonna flip,” Cam grinned.

“You're his brother, aren't you? Cam Riley? You were spectacular this season. I was sorry to hear the news. It's hardest when we lose young guys, you know.”

Cam nodded. “Thanks. I'm alive and well, and I got to play for

Toronto, even if only the minor leagues. A lot of people never get that far.”

“Good perspective,” Frank approved. “Anyway, I’ve gotta go, but I wanted to congratulate you, Noah.” Noah and Cam shook hands with Frank as they saw him off.

Then, Sarah approached. She wore a distinctive dark outfit like Noah’s that just screamed ‘curator’ plus a name badge. “Hey, Noah. That’s it for all the local celebrities, then. You should head home.”

“What? There’s still another half hour, and then cleanup, and the – the empty cups and cheese trays...”

Cameron grinned. Noah couldn’t stand leaving others to clean up, either, apparently.

“No, we’ve got it,” Sarah assured Noah with a laugh. “You’ve put a lot of hours into organizing this. Go and relax now. You’ve more than earned it. First solo show – great job.”

She leaned in to hug him and Noah let go of Cameron’s hand to hug her back. “Thanks, Sarah. Fine. We’ll go.”

Sarah smiled at Cam, too, and nodded. “Thanks for coming out. I’m sure I’ll see you at the next event, if not sooner.”

“Of course,” Cam agreed with an easygoing smile back at her. “I’ll make sure he rests.”

“It’ll be easier now that I’m not fretting about keys and paperwork and – oh, but I still have to do Jackson’s paperwork--”

“I’ve got it,” Sarah assured him with a laugh. “There’s nothing that can’t wait anyway.”

Cameron gripped Noah’s hand. “Besides, I have a new house to show you.”

“So I heard!” Sarah agreed. “Go show off your new house. Congratulations on that, too, by the way.”

“Thanks. See you,” Cameron waved. His parents were chatting with Thomas, Jackson still talked to Chase over in the corner, Jackson’s buddies mingled with Kevin from the hockey team...

He’d see everyone else some other time. It was time for him to be alone with Noah.

Even Noah sensed it; he led Cameron out of the arena without any

further protest, his expression calmer than it had been in weeks.

"That was great," Cameron murmured with a fond smile once they reached the car and he started it up.

"Next project: your house." Noah clapped his hands together. "Let me see what I'm working with."

Cameron laughed and turned on his headlights. If Noah needed a project, he'd give him one... but that would come later.

He had other plans for tonight.

---

Just as he'd hoped, Noah's first reaction upon seeing the living room was a quiet, "Wow."

He'd swapped out the chandelier for a better one – a cascade of glass shards on a dimmer circuit. Now Cameron could turn the living room lights to just a gentle, romantic glow that bathed the main floor and the upper hallway. He'd set up his newly delivered furniture cozily around the living room fireplace. Even the kitchen was neat and tidy, though he'd only finished unpacking that this morning before work.

"I got something to celebrate your show, too... and the house." Cameron left his shoes and jacket by the door. He brought Noah to the kitchen island where he'd set up a thin vase with a single rose and two wine glasses.

"Oh, you didn't have to!" Noah relaxed into the bar stool at the kitchen island.

"Want anything?" Cameron added. "I think I filled up on cheese and crackers and fruit at the show, but I've got nibbles..."

"I did, too," Noah laughed. "I'm fine. Just... a glass of wine, and you."

Cameron smiled and leaned in to press his lips against Noah's. He popped the cork on the wine bottle and poured them each a glass.

"You learned fast. This is my favorite," Noah murmured as he swirled his glass around and raised it to his nose.

"I made a note of it in my phone," Cameron confessed, and Noah laughed. "I'm a meticulous romantic."

Noah smiled, raising the glass to his lips to sip. He closed his eyes in the kind of pure enjoyment Cameron loved seeing on his face. "I like

all your romantic habits.”

Cameron sank into his seat and sipped his wine. Their knees bumped as the two of them swiveled in the chairs to look around.

“This is already a beautiful space,” Noah admitted. “But with that vaulted, open ceiling... there's so much I can do with the living room. And I already see the perfect spot for that hockey puck piece.”

“Yeah?” Cameron smiled.

“Mmhhh.”

They finished their glasses of wine in contented silence, sometimes reaching out to touch each other's arm. Each time they did, Cameron's nerves buzzed with a pleasant tingle.

By the time their glasses of wine were done, he had a good idea he knew what Noah wanted, too. “Shall I take you on a tour?”

“You can skip the rest of the house and bring me to the bedroom,” Noah teased. “The rest of the tour can come tomorrow after I've slept.”

“Aye aye, sir,” Cameron winked. He took Noah by the hand to lead him up the open staircase to the bedroom, pausing at the top of the stairs for a quick kiss.

When they reached the bedroom, Noah nudged the door closed and glanced around the room. The walls were a soothing, yet sexy burgundy. The elegant, low bed frame Cameron had chosen emphasized the spacious room and glossy hardwood floors. “This is nice.”

“Much better than it would have been on moving day,” Cameron added with a wink.

Noah slid his arms around Cameron's waist and leaned into his body to silence his teasing with a long, slow kiss. His lips sucked Cameron's lightly and his tongue danced at the tip of Cam's. Then, he whispered, “Fine. You were right.”

Cameron's lips tingled so much he could hardly speak. “Can I get that on tape? In case I need it again?”

Noah snorted. “Take me to bed, Cam.”

Cameron shivered. Despite the short distance between the door and bed, Cameron swept Noah off his feet. He carried him the whole half-dozen steps to bed, then gently laid him down and crawled over him.

Noah pulled him down with his hands wrapped around his waist. Cameron nestled between his thighs. Their bodies were warm together, thin trousers not hiding much as their groins bumped together. Their cocks were already throbbing to life.

Indeed, it only took one more slow, sensual kiss from Noah. Cameron ground against Noah's thigh and moaned, pulling back from the kiss for breath. "Jesus."

"I love how much you swear," Noah informed him with a grin. "You try to be a gentleman and not curse in public, so I know I'm doing things right in bed..."

Cameron kissed the smirk off his lips, sucking Noah's lips between his one at a time. He loved to flick his tongue along them, nip them, then kiss them so thoroughly Noah barely breathed.

When Noah was hard and twitching against his hip, they pulled each other's clothing off. Cameron's suit jacket, Noah's waistcoat, both of their collared shirts came off one piece at a time. By the time their bare chests rubbed, Cameron's heart pulsed with excitement. He leaned in to kiss at Noah's neck, then licked his way to his throat to kiss up it to his chin, then down to his collarbone.

If they couldn't fuck like animals every day, he'd take it slower with Noah. At least, until he got the letter with the date of his specialist appointment. They had all the time in the world together now.

Noah unfastened Cam's trousers and slid them down along with his underwear, then Cameron did the same for Noah. They kicked their way out, pants and socks and all, until they were naked together on the freshly-made bed.

Noah arched into Cameron and wrapped his legs around his waist, then pressed his lips by Noah's ear. "Make love to me."

Cameron didn't waste a second grabbing lubricant. As he pushed his fingers into Noah's tightness and the man firmly sucked on his neck, he took it slow. He wanted Noah to remember this moment for years to come.

They'd always shared a deep intimacy in bed, even during their fast and hard sex, but this time was different. There was something deep, yet unspoken here.

Cameron rubbed the bump inside gently as he pushed his fingers in and pulled out, simulating the motion of sex. He kept Noah's body pinned flat to the bed with his weight. Noah's chest rapidly rose and

fell. Quiet sounds of approval spilled from his lips with each little thrust of Cam's fingers.

Noah slapped his wrist after a couple minutes. "That's good."

*I'll find a time to make him come with only my fingers... but now isn't the right time.* Cameron grinned and wiped his fingers off, then stroked himself. "You sure you don't want a condom?"

"No condom," Noah murmured simply and firmly, smiling up at him.

Cameron's heart soared. He leaned in for another spontaneous kiss as he stroked his lubed hand up and down his shaft until he was sure he was ready.

When he brought his fist between Noah's leg and let his tip press into him, Noah opened up perfectly for him. His body was tight and warm around him. Cameron thrust in slowly, enjoying the naked sensation of skin on skin, his body locked together with Noah's.

One thrust at a time, he plunged deep inside Noah and pulled out again with skilled thrusts of his muscled hips. Noah clearly loved the power behind them. His hands curled around Cam's hips and nails bit into his thighs.

Within a minute, Cameron found the perfect rhythm to make Cam's cock throb and Noah's body shudder with each thrust.

"Cam... I love you," Noah whispered.

Cameron's eyes widened, but he didn't hesitate to whisper back, "I love you, too, Noah." He'd never been more certain of anything.

A grin cracked Noah's lips, and then he clicked his tongue. "You can make love a little harder, then."

Cameron laughed and braced himself on his arm to thrust deeper and faster. His own itch had to be satisfied, but more importantly, he wanted to make Noah moan until he lost his senses.

It didn't take long: Noah's body arched with each good thrust. His leg wrapped around Cameron's thighs while his other foot pressed into the bed. One arm tightly wrapped around Cameron's back, their chests pressed together as Noah was blanketed with Cam's weight.

"Yes...!" Noah moaned, panting harshly for breath. Before he could even ask, Cameron reached between them to close a hand around Noah's cock and jerk his hand up and down.

Noah's body quivered and clenched around Cam. Cam's own thighs



clenched, his balls drawing tight.

*Not yet... Not yet, hold out...*

"I fuckin' love you," Cam growled, leaning in for a possessive, hot, hard kiss to take Noah's breath away. Then, he twisted his hand around Noah's shaft just right.

"I lo-- uh! Cam!" Noah came hard, moaning and whimpering as he pushed his head back into the pillow. His whole body arched up against Cam – not hard enough to lift him, but hard enough to rub their bodies and stimulate Cam's whole body with just the extra tingling tension he wanted.

"Yes...!" Cam grunted as warmth splattered between them. The tight clenches pushed him over the edge, too. He thrust hard into Noah with each burst of heat and warmth through his body until the bed creaked, his claim laid inside Noah's body.

When his cock finally softened and slipped out, Cameron's chest still heaved as he lay still on top of Noah to catch his breath.

Noah wouldn't let him go anyway, his arm still around his back.

"I love you," Noah whispered, finally finishing the sentence again. "I really do."

Cam's heart soared. "I'm so glad I met you."

"Me, too," Noah murmured, kissing Cameron's cheek and neck until Cam rolled onto his side. Noah just followed, rolling to straddle Cameron and press kisses against his lips.

Cameron grinned against Noah's lips and wrapped his arms around his back as Noah's weight pressed against his chest.

It was almost time to make Noah relax for the night... perhaps after one more round. This time, Noah was taking the lead. He ground in small circles against Cameron, giving him a playful grin that made Cameron laugh.

"Again?"

"Again."

They had already been through so much, but there was so much more to look forward to; Cameron was certain of it.



THE RILEY BROTHERS BOOK 2

E. DAVIES

## Prologue

He was about to run, wasn't he?

Chase was reaching for the door already, taking a step back before Jackson could even zip up again. His eyes were wide with anxiety, and Jackson thought – hoped – he knew what it was about.

There was so much depth to their friendship that they hadn't yet explored. Chase was terrified he'd just fucked it up.

“Wait,” Jackson interrupted Chase's escape, taking his hand. “May I please return the favor?”

Chase's hand was warm and soft, not roughened and callused by tools. He had an artist's hands. The touch stilled Chase, who stared at him for a second. “Uh...”

“I'd like to, if you're okay with it.” Jackson watched the nervousness flicker across Chase's face. He looked nothing like the brash young man who'd just pushed him up against the wall.

Was Chase this unaccustomed to reciprocation?

“Okay,” Chase whispered at last, and despite his nerves, there was a tiny, hopeful smile on his lips.

Jackson had to share his thought. “You're gorgeous.” His gaze wandered over soft cheeks and the kissable lips that had just pressed against his own.

God, he wanted to make Chase feel just as good. Maybe help Chase do a little less chasing and a little more... enjoying.

“Th-Thanks,” Chase laughed, looking bashful. “Glad I give such good head.”

*It's not just that. Your self-esteem is all wrapped up in sex, isn't it?* “Oh, you do,” Jackson assured him, not sure yet how to address his suspicion.

But it was true, too.

Jackson smiled, stepping closer to Chase again. He caressed his sides, then his thighs and ass. Chase ground into his leg, his breath catching. Jackson hauled Chase up into his grip, carrying Chase over to the

workshop table.

“Oh, fuck!”

Jackson laughed and slid Chase onto the table. Once he swept the table off with his arm, he pushed him flat on his back. “You like your men big and strong, don't you?”

Chase breathed out, “Yeah.” He looked stunned now – spellbound. His cock was standing to attention under denim.

Jackson rubbed it firmly, watching Chase's head roll back as he moaned. “And good with their hands?” He crouched over Chase, leaning across the table and bracing himself over Chase's head.

They kissed hard. Chase grabbed Jackson's face, pulling him even closer. Chase shivered as each nerve in his body lit up with Jackson's wandering touch. They gasped breaths against each other's mouths. The rough, open-mouthed kisses left Chase squirming and moaning with need.

Warmth. Togetherness. A friendship growing into... much more.

Jackson's heart hurt with the desire to kiss every inch of Chase's body and learn this whole new side of him. One step at a time, though. The first step was convincing Chase that he deserved every ounce of attention Jackson wanted to give him.

“Oh, yes, please,” Chase moaned. His cock, still trapped in his jeans, ground against Jackson's thigh with every arch of his body.

*This* was his most immediate need, and Jackson couldn't wait to satisfy it.

## Jackson

The best sound in the world was a sizzle. To Jackson Riley, it meant hot metal gripped in his tongs and plunged into a barrel of water.

Jackson smiled. He lifted the rod and flipped his hand over. As he dipped the other end into the barrel, the last few inches of metal cooled. This was the last railing of the night; it was getting late. He worked from his suburban backyard workshop, which was covered in ordinances. He'd modified his anvil to deaden the sound, but his workday had to be over at 9 p.m..

Now, he had to decide what to do for supper.

He clamped one end, then twisted the railing around and hammered the other end. The twisted rods bent out and he shaped them with ease. The metal was quite cool by the time he finished flattening the smooth, flowing stems. He dunked the metal again and set it down to finish tomorrow.

Now that he lived next to his two brothers and worked in his backyard, there were certain perks. For one, he didn't have to run back and forth to his workshop to get measurements for the custom work he was doing for his brothers.

Right now, he was working on custom wrought iron railings for his little brother, Cameron. Cam's house had a vaulted ceiling over the living room, and the old railing overlooking it was... ugly. Jackson was creating new railings with his signature twisting, flowing, graceful patterns.

After raking the coals out and sprinkling water on them, Jackson pulled up a chair at the workshop bench. He had to wait for them to finish cooling. His own projects were still in the sketching stages, and he worked on them whenever he had a few minutes, such as now.

He liked the idea of swirls and metal beads molded into the balusters. He'd done a few custom railings for home builders, a few months ago, with an onion effect; he'd liked that, too. He was trying to combine them into something that was not too showy yet highlighted his skills. The sketchbook was full of ideas, none of which had quite worked

perfectly.

“Ah, fuck it,” he finally muttered and flipped the book shut. He waved a hand over the coals, then raked them again to make sure there were no remaining sparks.

Jackson walked through the grass to the back door of his house. The lights were off at Cam's, so he was probably at Noah's place. Thomas's bedroom light was on but the main floor was off. *Reading in bed again, I bet. Nerd.* He smiled to himself.

Once Jackson was inside, he fumbled with the light switch to illuminate the kitchen.

Burgers? No, he'd done those on the barbecue with his brothers for supper yesterday. Rice and chicken breast? Too much effort.

Jackson pulled open the fridge to look over his options. He had leftover pasta salad and chicken wings. That would do. It was too late to cook a full meal.

He dumped everything onto a plate and put it into the microwave, then sank onto the kitchen stool to wait.

Except for the whir of the microwave and the kitchen clock ticking, the house was quiet and dark. He didn't bother to get up and turn on more lights yet. He was heading straight to bed after supper and maybe a TV show.

Jackson's brothers had moved back to town three months ago now. Some things had changed over the summer, but others hadn't. Being around Cameron and Noah made it hard to ignore his bachelor status.

“Bachelor for life,” he murmured as the microwave dinged its completion. He grabbed his plate and utensils to sit at the kitchen island. That usually didn't sound so bad, but now and then...

He moved to the living room to switch on the TV.

## Chase

“Oh, man,” Chase yawned, raising the back of his hand to cover a yawn. He pressed the end of the pen into his lip as he gazed down at his sketchbook, flicking his tongue along the tip. When he closed his lips and sucked, it took him a few moments to clue in to what he was doing.

*God, I need to get laid.*

It had been days, but he'd been working overtime all week.

He added a few more swirls of ink with his pen before pushing the sketchbook back. That looked like a fine rough draft.

It was a blocky tattoo of deep black swirls and geometric shapes. This customer had first asked for the same old gross “tribal tattoos” as everyone else. Finally, the guy had agreed to consider something in a similar aesthetic.

Chase hoped he could talk him into this design instead. It would look great on his body shape. A lot of guys around here just didn't understand why asking for “a tribal tattoo” was so fucking gross. Chase hated doing tattoos that made him uncomfortable. He couldn't turn the job down easily, though. He needed more in his new portfolio, and he didn't call the shots at this shop. He'd have to have a word with Floyd.

Small-town New Brunswick.

He sighed, fidgeting with the pen a few more times. He tossed it aside on the desk and leaned back to stretch out his back. Chase's gaze wandered around the shop: glass cabinets he'd polished twice today, a bright waiting room, and no sketchy ads. He'd gotten a job at a pretty good place, all things considered.

And there *were* good jobs. This girl had come in looking for some fun flower watercolors. He was looking forward to getting a chance to work on those. That was a lot closer to his preferred style, but he'd do whatever paid the bills until he built up another portfolio.

Fuck, his chest still burned when he thought about his old portfolio.

Hours – hundreds of hours – spent building that up.

It was all gone.

He ground his teeth, checked his watch, and went to lock the door of the shop. Microwave mac and cheese was calling to him.



Jackson

“Yo, little bro'. Ready to go? Get this show on the road?”

Cameron groaned from the landing at the top of his staircase. “Never rap, please.”

Jackson just grinned and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Don't keep your boyfriend waiting.”

“Yeah, hold on a sec.”

Jackson leaned on the front door frame of Cam's place. His gaze wandered up to the shoddy wooden railings overlooking the vaulted living room. He was looking forward to ripping out and replacing those. It would make the house feel much more like the Toronto loft aesthetic he knew Cam was going for.

His little brother came thundering down the stairs two at a time and jumped on the landing. He was looking good, in a black collared shirt with a few little flowers printed on it, and dark jeans. Cameron had chosen shiny brown boots that matched his belt.

Cam looked thinner, too. Upon his diagnosis, they'd all realized how lucky Cam was to make it through his pro-sports career without cardiac arrest. His condition, CPVT, was usually spotted in young teens or kids. The fact that he'd made it until now was nothing short of a miracle.

Needless to say, they'd forbidden him from exercising. Beta-blockers weren't good enough on their own. The family was preparing for surgery soon, while Cam was still in shape and likely to recover fast. Cam was losing muscle, and it was hard not to notice.

Jackson tried to drag his thoughts away from the worries that had haunted him over the summer. “Noah's done a number on your wardrobe,” he teased.

“What?”

“Floral print?”

Cameron rolled his eyes. “Apparently they're “in” this summer.”

Jackson laughed and stepped back so Cameron could lock up. It was mid-August and still warm, so they didn't need jackets for the quick walk. They were heading to the bar downtown to catch up with friends.

Thomas didn't usually come out with them, but Cameron often did, and so did his friends. Noah's friends joined in now and then. They'd become a loose friendship group of mostly guys who went out for drinks once or twice a week.

Noah, Cam's boyfriend, was good for him, at least. He made sure Cam got out of the house to socialize, and Cam had loosened up about his condition a lot.

"How was work?"

"Oh, god," Cameron complained. "I can't bend over."

Jackson raised his eyebrows, deadpan. "Noah was working with you today?"

"No, I – fuck off," Cam groaned and smacked Jackson's shoulder. "I was taking honey off the hives. It's fuckin' heavy. You're disgusting."

Jackson just laughed and elbowed Cam in return. They strode down to the sidewalk, and crossed the street. "You're always out at his place these days."

"Yeah. It's getting annoying going back and forth between our places."

Jackson cast a sideways glance at Cam. Was he hinting at Noah moving in...? Maybe to help with his recovery? Jackson didn't even want to think of that yet, though. "When's his lease up?"

"November." Cam shoved his hands in his pockets. "We've been talking about it."

"Nice," Jackson nodded. "The two of you are... well, it's been three months already, huh?"

"Three and a half." Cameron waited at the crosswalk with Jackson, glancing back at him now. "Yeah... it'd be six months when his lease is up. So..."

"Six months isn't too soon. As long as you feel ready."

"I am. I think he is, too."

Jackson smiled and clapped Cameron's arm as they crossed the street to the bar. "Good for you, man."

“So--”

No way. Jackson went on as if he hadn't heard Cameron beginning to form the dreaded question in response. “Kevin's coming tonight, huh? Ryan said he'd be here too.”

Cameron paused, then went on. He opened the door for Jackson and glanced inside. “Looks like Kevin's already here.”

Kevin, the captain of Noah's casual hockey club was always up for a drink. He was a house painter and university student heading into his last year of school.

“Hey, man.” Ryan came up behind them, clapping both of them on the back. He worked as a carpentry apprentice. “I've got this round. Just Kevin here?”

“Oh, don't mind, it's only me,” Kevin laughed.

“I didn't mean that,” Ryan snorted. “The usual?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“I'll help,” Jackson offered, walking up to the bar to help carry back beer bottles, plus a Coke for Cam. “Noah's supposed to be here any time now, too. I haven't heard from anyone else yet, but we'll just see who shows up.”

“Fair enough. How was your week?”

“Ohhh, so many pieces. I got an order of three hundred rails.”

Ryan shrugged. “Whatever pays, eh? Who's it from?”

Jackson took a couple open beer bottles when they were handed over. “Derek – the guy who's in charge of the new subdivision from Frontier Homes.”

“Oh, yeah, I know him. He seems all right.” Ryan handed over cash with a nod of thanks to the bartender and grabbed the other three.

As Jackson caught up on his week, his gaze wandered back to Cameron. “He told you the news yet?”

“No? I don't think so,” Ryan answered. “What is it?”

“I'll tell you at the table.”

They slid in moments later, just as Noah came in. He always swished his way around, a bit like Thomas. His mannerisms made Jackson smile fondly.

A quick glance at his brother showed him looking just as enchanted as ever. Cameron's eyes lit up as he stood up to greet his boyfriend with a kiss and pull a chair out for him. Noah wore a vest and collared shirt and tie – he'd been curating some art show or another, then.

“Hi, guys,” Noah greeted. He took his beer with a smile and sipped it. He managed not to wince. “Thanks.”

Jackson chuckled. Noah didn't really drink beer, but around the guys he made an exception for bonding purposes. “Thank Ryan.”

“Nah,” Ryan waved it off. “So Cam has news?”

Cameron sank back into his chair, his expression tighter as he grabbed his bottle of Coke. Since going on beta-blockers, he was banned from drinking. “I got the letter with my surgery date.”

“Oh, shit,” Kevin exclaimed. He didn't know the full extent of Cameron's undiagnosed heart condition. That May, he'd come home from Toronto just as he'd been on the verge of being drafted. When he'd bowed out of the hockey club Kevin captained, Cam had dropped hints. Everyone knew he was waiting on surgery.

Noah smiled, glancing back at Cameron. “He's been waiting for months now. The specialist okayed him. It's been hell with all the specialists deciding what exactly he needs done and where...”

“I bet,” Ryan frowned. “Good job, man. When is it?”

“December.”

Noah added, “I still can't believe they won't get him in sooner...” For once, he looked pissed, his dark brows drawing together protectively.

“I was lucky even to get all those specialist appointments over the summer,” Cameron reminded Noah. He rubbed his boyfriend's arm. “I got ahead of a lot of people.” He glanced at the others. “It's an obscure procedure, they told me. Takes a real pro to do it, and there's only a couple in the country.”

Noah loosened his tie, the fight going out of him. “Right.”

“How long does recovery take?” Ryan asked.

“Hard to say,” Cameron answered, his jaw tight. “The first couple months are riskiest. I can't exercise hard. Even afterward... that depends.”

“Damn,” Kevin shook his head. “And I was just getting used to telling people we got a pro on our team.” That broke the mood a little and

everyone chuckled. “Glad you're getting treatment finally, though, man. My partner took *months* to get specialist referrals...”

As the others lapsed into conversation about the healthcare system, Jackson's mind wandered again. He kept glancing at Cameron and Noah. They'd scooted their chairs closer together so their arms touched. Noah reached out to play with Cameron's hair now and then or adjust his collar.

Jackson's heart squeezed with yearning. Maybe he should get dating... but every gay guy he knew here just wasn't a fit. But there could be some who just didn't hang out with his crowd of beer-loving, hockey-playing guys.

Online dating could be an option.

Hell with it, maybe he'd meet someone new and... get some stress out. Best-case scenario, he could get a date or two. Hanging out with friends was fine, but he had to avoid becoming a romantic hermit.

---

“What am I doing?” Jackson groaned as he leaned back in his computer chair. His small office was covered in paperwork for his business, but he kept one desk clear for his computer.

He was going to have to bring his laptop to the couch and brainstorm.

Once he settled on the couch in the living room, Jackson opened his profile again and stared at it.

What defined him? What would men find appealing, aside from the blacksmith thing? That *did* get him a lot of attention, and he wasn't ashamed to admit it was kind of nice. But what would be interesting about the rest of him?

He bit his lip. *Perpetual bachelor blacksmith who puts his family first? Not a great line.*

Jackson wrote something to that effect: he was looking for fun dates and maybe settling down with the right guy. He wrote that he put family and his partner first, but that his blacksmithing work was also important to him.

It seemed so bare compared to the profiles he'd glanced over already. Everyone interesting had stuff to say about their job or their hobbies. The guys with bare profiles didn't catch his eye, and he knew they'd look at his bare profile the same way.

He couldn't ask his brothers. That would be way too weird. Someone who knew him loosely but without much of a personal connection...

*Chase?*

Jackson tried to ignore the flip-flop in his stomach. Chase was a relatively new and gorgeous friend, but he'd never shown a hint of interest in Jackson.

They went out for coffee every few weeks to hang out and bitch about their respective arts jobs that weren't counted as artistic by enough people. Chase was a tattoo artist, and he did damn good work... but most people just didn't understand what went into it. And Chase was gay, so he knew what men were looking for.

He pulled out his phone to send Chase a text.

*Hey :) Wanna meet up for coffee soon? I need your opinions on dating.*

Moments later, he had his answer.

*Someone WANTS my opinions? OMG. ;) Tomorrow at 4?*

Jackson grinned.

*Works great. See you then.*

They might only be casual friends, but it would be nice to get out of the workshop a little early. Jackson shut the laptop without a second thought and turned his attention to the TV.

## Chase

Oh, boy, was Chase ready to complain about all the asshole guys in town. If Jackson had dating questions, he had more than enough answers.

Jackson was buff and gorgeous, but he always acted restrained around Chase. He was one of the few guys around here who'd never hit on him. Well, he'd flirted a little when they'd met at an art show that spring, but since then... nothing. It was kind of a nice change, if disconcerting.

They vented together about being on the fringe of the arts scene and gay scene and shared stories of their work. Each of them was interested in the other. Blacksmithing and tattooing were totally different but both pretty unique arts professions.

If only Jackson wanted more than casual friendship with him.

He'd expected to bitch about flaky guys, but Jackson caught him off-guard. "Wait... What? You want to *start* online dating?"

Jackson nodded, cradling his white coffee mug by his chest. He wore his uniform: a dark gray t-shirt that hugged his pecs and stretched around his biceps. Fucking hell, he looked hot. Chase had done a good job pretending not to stare, or so he hoped. "I haven't really done it. I tried a few years ago but all I got were hookups."

Chase smirked. "Such innocence. So why do you need my help?"

Jackson snorted in laughter. "I need help figuring out what to say so I get a boyfriend, not horny guys."

"That's a tall order. I look like the love guru?"

"Nothing says he can't be a tattooed weirdo."

"Hey," Chase grinned. He sipped his coffee and winked. "I'm only freaky in bed. I'm quite normal the rest of the time. I can twist into all kinds of shapes, if it helps--"

"Yeah, yeah," Jackson waved him off with another laugh. "Anyway, what do I say?"

“Just be honest, man. You seem pretty down-to-earth. I mean, your brothers know you better... Why not ask them?”

Jackson winced and glanced down into his mug. “Um... embarrassed, I guess.”

It was almost hilarious to see a big guy who could lift Chase off his feet one-handed looking so bashful. It was kind of adorable in a heartthrob way, too. Chase took pity on him and grinned instead of laughing. “Why? Everyone dates online now.”

“Well, Cameron met Noah in person... Thomas doesn't really date, but... I don't know. It seems sketchy. I haven't even dated in ages.”

“Why now? Seeing Cam and Noah around?”

Jackson shook his head. “I don't know. I'm just lonely.”

That made Chase pause, the smile fading from his face at the raw admission. They weren't exactly best buddies, so he hadn't heard Jackson talk that way. *He must need my help bad.*

“I get it,” Chase assured him after a few moments. “Me, too. I've only got a few friends in the area, even having lived here for months now. One of them's the guy who owns the tattoo shop... The others are pretty much his friends.”

Jackson looked sympathetic. “Yeah. I'm lucky I've got buddies around here. Just none of them I want to... you know, romance,” he laughed.

Chase chuckled. “All right. You got a computer with you?” He didn't see a jacket or bag.

“Nah, only at home. D'you wanna come back with me?”

“Sure,” Chase agreed. For once, the implications weren't sexual. “I'll help you write your profile and woo all the knights in shining armor... armor that needs hammering. Heh...”

Jackson kicked him and laughed. “Shut up.”

As they finished their coffee, Chase's mind wandered. *How can a guy with a big family in the city, all those friends, and everyone he knows through work be lonely?*

Maybe he was just trying to take pity on Chase by offering him a hand of friendship. Hell, that was fine by Chase. He got to spend more time around the hunk, even if it was setting him up with someone who wasn't, well... *him!*



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“I think that should get some interesting messages. Fill those blanks in.”

Chase stretched his fingers and pushed the laptop back to Jackson. He watched him read his profile. It wasn't much – just a few sentences in each profile box – but it would get him started.

He'd already had to ask Jackson some questions, and the answers were interesting. Of the six most important things to him, Jackson's list was predictable. He'd said family, going out with friends, his blacksmithing work, and great home-cooked food. He'd thought for a moment before adding sunrises. Chase had pressed him for a sixth item and Jackson's thoughtful answer was, “A relationship when the time is right.”

That answer was still bouncing around Chase's mind. When the time is right? That didn't sound at all desperate – it sounded like he was happy to wait for years longer, if he had to. Not like Chase.

Jackson skimmed the profile. “This... this sounds decent. Wow.” He pointed at the screen. “Want to meet up for 'blank'?”

“I'm assuming you're not gonna put 'casual sex' in there,” Chase grinned. “Coffee or a beer or whatever.”

“A beer sounds weird. Alcohol on a first date. How about coffee?” Jackson typed that in. He mumbled under his breath as he filled in the other blanks. Chase left it to him to think of a hobby he wanted to share, his greatest secret, and what he was looking for in a man.

He looked cute from this angle. Jackson hunched over the coffee table with his broad shoulders stooped enough to lean down and see the screen. His shirt rose up his back, sliding up enough to leave an inch or two of bare, tattoo-free skin.

Chase clamped down on his moment of arousal.

“Thanks,” Jackson concluded as he straightened up.

“Hey, it was only a few sentences here and there.” Chase pulled his gaze off Jackson's body and back to his face to make eye contact. *Stop ogling him, Jesus. You'll make things weird.*

“You wanna have supper with me and my brothers?”

Chase didn't have anywhere else to be, and he was running low on freezer meals. “Sure. Thanks. When?”

"Anytime I head outside and turn on the barbecue," Jackson laughed. "They'll smell it."

Chase laughed, too. That sounded nice. "Barbecue? Burgers?"

"Yeah, burgers and steak and veggies. We've come up with a bunch of new recipes. Corn, salad, pizza, pineapple, asparagus, donuts..."

"Salad?" Chase laughed. "Pineapple? Donuts? I mean, corn and asparagus are kinda normal..."

Jackson winked. "Just for that, we're having salad to start and pineapple for dessert. C'mon." Jackson walked to his kitchen, and Chase found himself naturally following.

There was something about him that was just magnetic.

Jackson lit the barbecue first. They chatted more as they cut lettuce heads and defrosted burgers. Chase shucked the corn, his chest aching at the memories of shucking corn for family dinners.

By the time the ingredients were ready, there was a knock on the back door and it slid open.

"Oh, hey," Cameron greeted, raising a hand in greeting to Chase. "What's up?"

Chase had only met him twice. First had been at the same art show where he and Jackson had met. Jackson had sculpted this gorgeous metal statue based on Cameron. It still stood in the arena lobby. Then, Cameron bought Chase's art piece for his living room. It was a collection of miniature paintings done on a series of hockey pucks stuck together with needles. Chase was glad someone had loved it enough to buy it.

"Not much. How're the paintings looking?"

"C'mon over later and I'll show you," Cameron invited. "Noah found the perfect spot for it in the living room. I really like it, man, no bullshit. He makes good stuff." He reached out to shake hands again in greeting as he moved past Chase to his brother.

"He does," Jackson agreed.

Chase grinned. It was nice to hear from someone who appreciated the work he'd put into it. Usually, his art was done with needles and ended up on people's bodies.

"Thomas just got home. He'll be out in a few," Cam told them.

Jackson nodded. "Great. Carry this shit out for me, huh?" He handed Cam a plastic bin filled with barbecue tools.

"Sure, get me to do the heavy lifting," Cameron groaned. He pretended to struggle to haul the box outside.

Chase laughed. Cameron wasn't as muscled as Jackson, but he was pretty built himself. He looked a bit thinner than when they'd last met, though, and he was a little more on-edge.

"Can you take the corn out?"

"Yep." Chase carried the bucket of corn cobs outside to the table next to the barbecue where Cam was setting up the tools. "How's work going?" he asked Cameron. He remembered Jackson mentioning he was a beekeeper, but he didn't know anything else.

"Oh, busy this time of year," Cameron admitted. "My boss gave me the day off to see the doctor."

*Ahh, there is something up with him. Aw.* "Yeah? Must be good to have a break."

Cameron nodded. "I've got this heart thing that rules out exercise. This time of year's when all the heavy lifting happens... it's pissing me off," he laughed.

"I bet. I hate slowing down for anything."

A somewhat familiar voice filtered through the fence gate before Noah stepped through. "Hey, babe. Oh – hello!"

Noah had directed the same art show where they'd all met. He was a bit too... well... flamboyant for Chase's taste. Chase respected his artistic vision. It was just hard to be around him for too long.

"Hi," Chase answered with an awkward little wave. "How's it going?"

"Oh, good, can't complain. Well, I *can*, but... nobody will listen," Noah lamented, glancing at Cameron.

"Nope. He just wrapped one art show but he's already taken on two *more*... After complaining all summer about all the work they are." Cameron rolled his eyes.

"I couldn't turn them down." Noah leaned in to kiss Cameron's cheek. He nodded at Jackson as he emerged carrying a plate of burgers.

Chase smiled. "Where?"

"One's a private show by this rich art collector out in Oromocto. The

other's at the arts center downtown. I mean, it's a nonprofit... hence, I can't say no. And the first one pays well."

"It's all about money," Chase chuckled. "I mean, yeah, sure, we love art... but..."

Noah half-smiled. "You can't eat art."

"Well, if it's mine, you *could*--" Chase broke off, realizing that was a bit of a morbid joke.

"Oh, Jesus!" Cameron laughed from behind Noah, handing corn cobs to Jackson to throw on the grill. "No cannibalism jokes before supper."

Noah looked horrified, but he relaxed into a smile. There was a weird pause. Chase couldn't think of anything to say, and apparently, neither could Noah.

Chase moved toward Jackson instead. "Must have been a good summer for barbecuing." It had been hot and dry.

"Perfect. When the sun's starting to go down a little, early evening, it cools off. Now we've got those gates in, it helps. There's less running into and out of houses."

Cameron laughed. "Though certain people kicked out the boards in the fence before we were even moved in."

"Liar. All the boxes were inside, ergo, we were moved in." That was someone Chase didn't recognize. He might have seen him at the show, but he couldn't remember talking to him. He looked a lot like Cameron and Jackson in the nose and eyes, but he was built like Chase or Noah – willowy and slender. He didn't dress as femininely as Noah, though.

It was hard to do anything as femininely as Noah.

"That's our brother Thomas," Jackson added, waving the flipper at him. That easy way of being around each other made Chase's chest ache with yearning.

He wouldn't mind having a family like this.

"Hi," Chase greeted, and Thomas nodded in return. "What's up?"

"Oh, long day at the bank, but I can't complain. Someone came in looking for a savings account we've never offered. We're still not sure where they heard about it from..."

Jackson laughed. "Drama, then."

"For Fredericton, that's drama," Thomas laughed. "And I feel about ten times less likely to get shot here... I used to work in Halifax," he added in explanation for Chase.

Chase nodded. "I've heard about it."

"Grab a plate. Corn's up, guys."

Even though he'd met Noah before the rest of them, Chase still wasn't sure how to react when Noah pirouetted out of Jackson's way and everyone grinned. Something prickled deep inside: resentment, maybe? That was kinda weird.

Chase tried to put it aside and relax with the rest of Jackson's family. Even if it was a painful reminder of what he'd lost, he refused to think directly about *that*.

Chase was going to fucking have fun, and make friends he didn't fuck. He deserved that much.

*You can't have this one. Just learn to be okay with that.* Didn't stop him from fantasizing a little about what it would be like to kiss Jackson, though.

Thomas

After the barbecue, Cameron headed to Noah's place and Jackson started work at his forge. Thomas cleaned his kitchen and made his grocery list while he had a moment to breathe. He left the window open to smell the wood smoke from Jackson's forge.

Neither of them had someone else to cook for, so sometimes they cooked supper together when Cam wasn't around. Jackson tended to go for easy meals when others weren't there. Thomas, however, didn't mind cooking for himself. Even at the end of a long week, it was a nice break. He liked taking that time.

Thomas smiled as he glanced out across their yards from the kitchen window, washing the last few pots. Cam was lucky that he'd met Noah before even properly moving to the city. Thomas had moved back here at the same time in May and Jackson had always lived here.

*It's not like I don't try, though.*

With that in mind, Thomas dried off his hands and grabbed his laptop. Curled on the sectional couch, he first checked his dating site messages, then browsed for local matches. He was used to seeing the same few faces, but it was possible someone new had signed up.

There was a new match, and his photo looked weirdly familiar.

"Oh, Jesus."

Jackson's Facebook profile photo for ages had been him in front of the walking bridge in town. Before that, he'd had a handsome professional shot taken of him while forging. Those two thumbnails showed up when Thomas hovered over his profile.

His brother was on the dating site, too?

*Fuck. Has he already seen me?*

Thomas's hand almost shook. He navigated quickly to his recent visitors and scanned the list.

Nope. He'd found Jackson first.

He clicked back to the profile and blocked it before his nerves calmed.

It wasn't like it would be *awful* if Jackson figured out he was on the dating site looking for men, but...

It was complicated and Thomas didn't want to get into thinking about it. His two gay brothers of all people would be cool with it, but *he* didn't want to talk to *them*. And for their part, neither of them had ever bugged him, thank god.

He was curious, though. He hadn't heard Jackson mention online dating before. Might be worth stopping by for a chat.

Thomas closed his laptop and headed out to the workshop.

The muffled ringing of metal sounded through the door. Thomas padded through the tall grass en route to the converted workshop building where Jackson had installed his forge. It had been hell to get it up to code, but Thomas knew Jackson was prouder of it than his own house now.

Thomas knocked, not that it would have made a difference, and let himself in. He closed the door after himself to keep the sound down.

"Jesus, it's hot in here." Good thing he was just in a t-shirt and light jeans.

"Oh, I know." Jackson was shirtless and red-cheeked. His gaze was utterly focused on the strips of metal he was hammering together. His big brother was ripped, sweat running down his back as his biceps rippled with the effort of joining metal to metal.

Sometimes Thomas felt bad that he didn't work out even a little compared to his brothers. Then, he remembered that he liked pasta and hated lifting weights. If he never landed a man because of it, fine.

Jackson paused to look over at Thomas. "You all right?"

"Oh, yeah," Thomas smiled. "Need any help?"

"Grab those metal bits and clean them up if you wanna help," Jackson nodded. Thomas went over to start gathering them into a bucket. "Having an exciting Friday night?"

"Not as exciting as yours," Thomas laughed. He examined a few cast-off scraps, wondering if they could be turned into art pieces somehow. Some of them were twisted in cool ways. Maybe that was Jackson's plan. "It was cool to meet Chase earlier, though."

"Yeah, we have coffee now and then. He's nice. A little hard to read sometimes, but nice." Jackson frowned at his metal piece. He folded his arms.

“What's up?”

“Whenever I wonder why I don't have a boyfriend, two seconds later, I geek out over these – no, seriously, look at these joins. C'mere. Look.”

Thomas glanced over at where Jackson pointed. “Well done.” Thomas didn't know what he was looking for. It was definitely a section of Cameron's railings for the landing above his living room. It looked... well, just like the plan had shown. “You'll find a man who appreciates... well-forged joins.”

Jackson laughed and turned the whole metal piece over. It clanged against the table as he inspected the cooling rods he'd just joined. “Thanks for your vote of confidence.”

“Have you thought about trying?” Thomas asked casually, hoping he didn't give himself away with some nervous tic.

“Yeah, actually,” Jackson answered. He paused and looked at Thomas, but he didn't seem to suspect anything. Instead, he looked back at his piece. “Can you... not tell Cam this?”

Thomas perked up with curiosity. “Of course.”

“I just registered for an online dating site. I was getting Chase to help me with my profile.” Jackson fidgeted with his hammer, tapping it against the metal here and there.

“Cool,” Thomas answered to show his brother that he was fine with it. Jackson was a little old-fashioned in some ways.

“Really?”

“Yeah!” Thomas laughed. “Everyone's meeting people online these days. But why not tell Cam? He wouldn't mind either.”

Jackson rolled his eyes. “Cause he'll make fun of me.”

Thomas snorted with laughter. “Oh, can't take the heat?”

“Fuck off and get us a couple beers from my fridge,” Jackson laughed.

Thomas grinned and punched Jackson's shoulder on the way by. “Let me know if you meet up with anyone on there, yeah?”

“I will. Thanks, man.” Jackson looked more relaxed already and offered Thomas a smile. Little did Jackson know that Thomas had other reasons for offering brotherly support. Then, the question Thomas was hoping not to hear. “Hey, what about you?”

“What about those beers?” Thomas countered with a grin and walked



out to grab them. He knew Jackson would let it drop when he came back to the workshop... Jackson and Cam took hints well.

## Jackson

After he finally put out the forge for the night, Thomas having long since gone to read, Jackson checked his messages. So far, just a student who was too young for him and two guys who wanted to hook up.

He reminded himself what Chase had said. It would take time before people found his profile, and he should browse profiles and message others. With Thomas's support, he'd have a second opinion if he wasn't sure about someone. Thomas was a scarily accurate judge of character, and he didn't hold back with the truth. At least Thomas rarely made fun of Cam and Jackson like they did each other.

Even though Jackson wanted a date, he just couldn't be bothered to actively look for one.

He rubbed his chin as he set aside his laptop and turned on the television instead.

A date implied romantic pressure. Then there was that awkward chemistry assessment, and the bit where they tried to work out who was a top. Some guys weren't ballsy enough to just ask. Most assumed he was, anyway, and they weren't wrong.

Jackson wished he could have something a bit more... comfortable. Kind of like when Chase hung around, but with chemistry.

Well, with *mutual* chemistry.

Jackson had felt a weird moment when he'd walked Chase to his front door to collect his sweater before seeing him off. It was like the end of a first date when you didn't know whether to go for a hug or a kiss or a handshake. Jackson had ended up offering a handshake and half-hug in thanks for the profile help.

In response, Chase had just given him a polite "bye for now" and smiled. He must not have felt the same potential as Jackson. Jackson's arm had slid around that willowy body for a hug and Chase's warm body had pressed up against his...

He drew a breath and let it out, trying to get those thoughts out of his

head.

*Fuck. Maybe I do need to get laid if I'm thinking about buddies like that.*

Jackson reopened one of the messages, but the gut feeling he had in response made him close it again.

It was worth waiting for more.

## Chase

The music was pounding by the time Chase made it to the only gay club in the city. It was clean and classy, with lights and music that always made Chase feel a little higher on life. And the drinks were good and cheap. Even if it had been expensive and overrated, he still would've had to go. It was one of like, *two*, in the whole province.

Ugh, this place sometimes.

But it was so out of the way that it was the last place anyone would think to look for him.

It had been a long night, and still nobody had bitten. "Another cooler, please," he called over the counter to the bartender. He didn't even mind the music being loud up here by the bar. It was okay, sometimes, not to have to make conversation with the guys standing next to him.

After Chase paid for his cooler, he turned and leaned against the counter. Time to scan the room for available men.

It was often the same kind of crowd from week to week, so he already saw at least half a dozen guys he'd gone home with. He chugged from the bottle and decided he wanted someone new, but wouldn't complain if it were a repeat.

The club wasn't just for gay guys. The queers and freaks and shy people who didn't feel comfortable going out to mainstream bars wound up here. Lots of students who were flexible in their gender or sexuality, too. Then there were visitors from small towns looking to join the "big city's" nightlife.

It was a good thing. It made for some variety; otherwise it would have been the same hundred guys all the time.

Chase liked that he got so much attention here. Sure, every pickup line was the same, but it took the effort out of it. He wore his short-sleeved shirt or a low V-neck t-shirt to show off his tattoos. It made it easy for guys to approach and talk to him about them.

Some nights, like tonight, the conversation didn't go anywhere with

anyone, though. The club was nearly closing and there still wasn't a nibble. It was frustrating.

He heard someone talking over the music and turned to take him in. "Nice tats."

"Thanks," Chase automatically answered. The guy was a little taller than him, with broad shoulders and blond hair, a wicked smile. He had nice lips, at least. It might have been just the lighting, but his skin looked a little darker... Italian? He had the curly hair for it. "I'm Chase."

"Antonio."

Definitely Italian. Someone foreign – that was a bit more interesting. He turned to face Antonio. "Studying abroad?"

"Yeah. It's my first semester, so I moved here on August first to start my lease." Antonio looked casual. He wore a short-sleeved collared shirt of his own, and nice, smooth-looking trousers. He dressed well. All the Europeans did – the few who wound up in this city, anyway. Not a lot of people wanted to study abroad here compared to, say, Vancouver or Halifax or Toronto.

Chase nodded, taking a few deep gulps of his cooler. The accented words rolled off Antonio's tongue effortlessly. "You speak good English. Did you grow up speaking it?"

"Yes. English, French, and Italian. They're all pretty easy to learn." Antonio's eyes were raking up and down his body.

"We learn French, too, but it's Québécois. A little more slangy, I hear." Desire burned through Chase's body in response to the look. Just being wanted was enough to make him tingle. Being lusted after was even better.

Being lusted after by a stranger, someone he didn't have to look in the eye later, was fucking perfect.

It was probably sick, but that was the way it was: Chase needed to be wanted by people who didn't know who he was. Once the relationship got deeper, he got scared off. He was used to it and he adapted his dating patterns accordingly.

Antonio chuckled. His eyes were back on Chase's, and there was no doubt what he wanted. He slowly raised his bottle to his lips and tipped it back to drain it. He slid it across the bar and held out his hand. "Shall we dance or go to my car?"

The unspoken message: *Why even bother pretending?*

No need to feign interest when they could cut to the chase.

Chase answered, "You parked nearby?" He gulped the last few sips of his drink and pushed the bottle back, too. He stood up.

"In the library parking lot."

"That's pretty close."

Antonio's hand rested on his back to steer him out of the club. Chase avoided eye contact with the bouncer on the way by. Not that he felt guilty. He was fucking lucky, getting taken home by the hot new foreign exchange student without a fuss.

Chase's nerves tingled with the firm pressure on his back. As they waited for a taxi to pass before jaywalking, Antonio's hand slowly rubbed up his spine. He rubbed all the way up to his shoulder and back down. The slow circles of palm against his skin kept him on edge. Chase couldn't distract himself any longer: his cock started to stiffen.

"Do you like Fredericton?" Antonio chatted, in the tone of a man who was making more or less polite conversation. This was what Chase relished: being touched and desired, sharing bits of their lives without having to commit later. Without risking anything.

"It's not bad. You? So far?"

"I would say the same." Antonio snorted. "I had to buy a car in my first week, though. The buses here are... lame."

Chase laughed. Some slang was easy to pick up.

The walk to Antonio's car was short. That was lucky, since they kept bumping into each other's side deliberately. They touched each other's arm or back, and sometimes outer thighs. Once, Antonio reached in front of Chase to press a crosswalk button even though the street was empty. While pulling his hand back to himself, Antonio groped him.

Chase was aching for him. He strode across the street to wait while Antonio unlocked the car.

"You live nearby?"

"Uptown."

Chase grimaced. That was a long walk home for him.

"There's nobody else around," Antonio observed mildly, watching him

with those dark, lustful eyes.

*Easy decision.* Chase opened the back door and climbed in. It wasn't the first time he'd fucked in a stranger's backseat, and he was sure it wouldn't be the last.

Antonio tumbled on top of him, just barely pulling the door closed behind him. His body already blanketed Chase's. He pushed his knee into the backseat and straddled Chase. As he ground against him, Antonio yanked him up by the shirt to kiss him hard.

Chase moaned into Antonio's mouth. His hard cock appreciated the pressure of a hip – and then another cock pressing forward through layers of fabric.

“You have anything?”

“Huh?” Chase pressed a few more kisses to Antonio's lips.

Antonio gently sucked his lower lip. He whispered, “Tested?”

“Ah. Yeah. Nothing. You?”

“I'm good. And you are very handsome,” Antonio whispered. His breath was hot on Chase's lips as they pulled apart. Chase's heart pounded and body burned from the contact. “I spotted you instantly.”

Chase's ego soared. He couldn't help a grin. “Yeah? You're pretty hard to miss, too.” He reached up to comb a hand back through that thick, curly hair. *Soft* hair, too, Jesus.

That reminded him that he'd meant to check something. Chase reached down to run his hands across Antonio's ass, squeezing. His trousers *did* feel good. Probably some fancy Italian brand.

Antonio moaned, and Chase squeezed again, pulling him in tightly between his legs. He reached between them to fumble and get his jeans down.

When Chase's cock met open air, it throbbed with pleasure. He spread his legs, one knee bumping the back of the driver's seat while the other pressed up against the seat. He licked his own fingers and slid them inside, not wanting to allow Antonio this intimacy.

Antonio seemed fine with it – he was busy getting a condom on anyway. Chase couldn't see a lot of his dick in the dark backseat, but enough of it to know he'd feel it. Phew.

When his fingers slid out of himself, the lubricated condom tip – and he was thankful for that – pressed against him. Chase dug his fingers

into his own thigh and he gasped and rolled his head back at the penetration. The window steamed up behind them with the heat of their desire-laden breaths.

Antonio was thin but long, at least, almost filling him. He had a nice curve to him, but not the best Chase had felt.

At least he was good at fucking. The car rocked with the force of Antonio's thrusts inside him. His head rubbed across the prostate to send thrills of arousal through Chase's tense body.

"Gorgeous," Antonio praised. Chase realized it had been a while since a hookup praised him during sex instead of just before it.

"So are you," Chase murmured, and he meant it. Pretty, if not the guy he'd bring home for a date.

Antonio leaned down, pulling his shirt up around his chest so he could kiss along the tattoos over his chest and on his side.

Chase let the little sparks of desire be fanned into flames by the hot, wet pressure against bare skin. Antonio's thrusts grew harder and he was overcome by the moment. All rational thought was swept away by the mindless desire to come and make Antonio come, too.

Their grunts, moans, and the wet sound of sex and kisses echoed in the confines of Antonio's car. When Antonio came a minute or two later, his cock was buried deep in Chase. Chase rolled his head back to expose his throat and groaned. He reached down to stroke himself hard, their bodies still locked together. Antonio thrust with each little quiver of his body and muscles.

It was all sex and no space to breathe, utterly overwhelming Chase. Just the way he liked it.

Chase came hard, gritting his teeth together to try to stifle the sound as he cried out and grunted. He kept his hand over the tip of his cock to catch the mess so he didn't fuck up Antonio's seat. He clenched hard around Antonio's softening cock, his back arching as his chest heaved. He was half-desperate for breath for a few seconds. Once he caught it, he settled back down again.

"Thank you," Antonio murmured. "Very considerate."

Chase laughed breathlessly. The tension drained out of his body and Antonio slipped out. "Anytime. Got a tissue?"

"Here." Antonio pressed one into his hand and he used it to wipe both his hands clean. Antonio had a trash bag under the driver's seat, so



Chase put it in there. "Here good?"

"Yes." Antonio added his condom to the bag.

Antonio tried to brace himself above Chase so he could pull his pants back up and button them. Once he was decent, he wiped off both backseat windows. He pushed open the door by their feet and slid backward out of the seat.

That gave Chase enough space to yank his own jeans back up and clean up, tucking his shirt back into his waistband.

Antonio eyed him as he pulled himself out of the car, holding the back door open for him. "Thanks, gorgeous." He leaned in to air-kiss both of Chase's cheeks. It was an awkwardly intimate move compared to the usual rush out the door.

"You, too," Chase answered automatically, puckering his lips but not actually meeting skin. "Good luck in Fredericton."

*A whole semester or more of seeing this guy at the club. Oh, well, I'd do him again.*

It wasn't a long walk back home from here, but Chase still had a good ten or fifteen minutes to think about the nitty-gritty.

The way Antonio had watched him and told him he was sexy was... well, hotter than he'd had in a while. He hadn't been great on giving Chase pleasure, but a lot of guys didn't do that, either. It had been ages since anyone had even given him head.

Three AM thoughts were *always* destructive. Chase couldn't help them sneaking into his mind, though. He was good to be fucked or lusted after – he knew that much. Anything more? Nah. He wasn't interested anyway.

Chase kept his head down as he padded through the halls to his apartment. Getting exactly what he'd wanted that night didn't stop him feeling the usual low, twisting feeling in his stomach.

If what he wanted wasn't what he needed, what was?

## Jackson

Jackson's gaze focused intently on the fireplace mantel. It had always looked kind of cheap and factory-made, but he'd been willing to deal with it.

Might as well put it on the list.

As he walked around his house, notebook in hand, he wrote down his planned renovations. He wanted to combine the master bedroom with the small bedroom right next door, swap out the fireplace mantel, and rebuild the porch.

Jackson approached the sliding glass doors in the dining room. Another item occurred to him: a stone path out to the forge. It was just grass out to the shed. There was a worn dirt driveway around the side of the building to pull up his truck and load up materials or his work or take deliveries. Between the house and the front door of the workshop, though, there was nothing.

A proper path would be nice, complete with more backyard landscaping. It would be nice to have a private area near the house if he wanted one while his brothers used the barbecue. He envisioned each of them with a gazebo and privacy screening in a corner of their own yard.

After Jackson wrote that down, his gaze was drawn to the basement stairs. He rarely went down there except to grab things in storage, even though it was a neat little walkout space. Making it into a bachelor zone would be awesome.

The kitchen was fine for his needs and he didn't need spare bedrooms anyway. As a single guy, he didn't have to worry about sharing office space with anyone. He didn't anticipate that changing soon.

Might as well put his real estate to good use for himself.

Once he completed his list, he cut through the backyard to Cameron's place and headed in to join his brother. "Okay, I got the list."

Cameron patted the couch next to him and muted the TV while he grabbed his own notebook. "Right. Whatcha got?"

Jackson read out his list and Cameron nodded after each item. When he was done, Jackson raised his eyes to Cameron's. "Is that asking too much?"

"Nah. It's just gonna take me a little while over the winter to finish everything. Winter isn't the best construction time. I don't think I can get much done before surgery – at least, I can't bank on it."

"Right, no, of course," Jackson agreed. "I was thinking for after you recover, too. We can source materials in the meantime. My basement's almost empty and I can drive up to it from the path out to my workshop, so we can store materials in there."

"Really? Yeah, that's a good idea." Cameron rubbed his chin. "So each of us buys our own materials and then we swap labor until we're both happy with our houses, yeah?"

That sounded fair to Jackson. "Unless you decide you want a fuckin' mansion worth of work. Then you can pay me."

Cameron laughed. "No mansions," he promised. "What about Thomas?"

"He can help us..." Jackson trailed off, wondering what his little brother felt comfortable doing. He didn't seem to mind tidying up after them, but he was never one to rush to do the heavy lifting and prove himself. Then again, with Jackson and Cam competing a little on that front, he never had to.

"He's good at painting," Cameron continued. "I put him to work when I was doing my construction job. Back when he was in high school, remember? He said he needed the cash and he did it all summer."

"Ohhh, yeah, right." Jackson had forgotten about that summer job. "Well, all three houses do need paint." Then, he paused. "Did we ever find out what that was for?"

"No. For all we know he has some savings account overseas. He's secretly a millionaire now," Cameron laughed.

Jackson grinned. He wouldn't put it past Thomas.

Still, there were moments that made him worry. Sometimes he felt like he knew his little brother very well. Other times he realized he didn't know a lot of things about him.

Thomas steered the conversation away from dating, and he never talked about his future plans. He just skirted away from certain deeper topics, despite being a deep person. It was paradoxical and... well,

frustrating.

“He seems happy to be here,” Cameron commented, his mind working along the same lines. “He talking to you much?”

“Yeah, now and then he comes to help me in the workshop.” *Can't tell him what the last conversation was about.* “Still doesn't really talk much.”

“Well, we haven't seen a lot of him since he graduated, and even before then. Especially me,” Cameron frowned.

“Hey, not your fault,” Jackson reminded Cam. He was as firm as always when his brother felt guilty about his busy past life as a pro hockey player. “Things are changing now.”

“Yeah, they are.”

Come to think of it, Thomas had never talked to Jackson once about dating before now. Maybe things were changing more than Jackson knew.

## Chase

"I don't know, Floyd." Chase leaned on his elbow as he watched his boss and friend rearrange sketchbooks and photo books. He was trying to keep his tone casual. "Someone could still recognize my work."

"Okay, man, I know I said I wouldn't ask..."

Chase straightened up, his heart starting to thump with nerves. The other man was a little heavier-set than him, and had even more tattoos. He had about five years on him, too. Chase could take him. *No, wait, what the fuck? Where did that come from?* The guy wasn't about to leap over the counter at him just because he didn't have an art portfolio.

"You came here saying you'd worked for years but you couldn't use your portfolio online. Now you're telling me you can't even show people a physical copy? I mean, it's not like people can Google image search in real time."

Chase swallowed hard. "No..."

Floyd made eye contact. He pulled up a chair and sat down opposite Chase. "Talk to me, man. We're buddies, right?"

More so than anyone else Chase knew, yeah. "Definitely." Chase was still reluctant. It was like dragging himself across hot coals to think about it, let alone spill his guts to someone else. "It's just... pretty raw."

"Then the shop's closed." Floyd stood up and flipped the sign over. He approached Chase and reached out to touch his arm, leaning on the other side of the counter. He smelled like citrus and sweet things. "Man, you get twitchy when new people walk in. You hate seeing parents bring their kids. You wrap yourself up in your own head even when we're going out for drinks..."

All true.

"Who are you running from? We can get you help."

Chase swallowed hard. He'd been dreading this conversation for months. Everyone always figured out that something was up, and then

there'd be pity. At least he knew it wasn't a pity friendship – Floyd had been straight with him from the beginning.

The easiest way to put it was also the simplest. “My family... didn't take me coming out very well.”

Floyd's face fell and his brows furrowed in anger. “I'm sorry. Are you safe here?”

“I don't... I don't know. I think so.”

“You don't feel safe, though, huh?” Floyd had a knowing look, but there was something else about him. “Little bit of advice... Find something that makes you feel stronger. Kickboxing or archery or wrestling or... whatever floats your boat.”

Floyd did competitive archery, and for the first time, Chase wondered why. He lifted his head to watch his friend instead of shying away from eye contact. Floyd knew a lot more about what his mental state was like than he was letting on.

“It's just... on top of everything else,” Chase sighed. “It's hard living here. And I don't know what I want in a relationship. And everything else is rocky at the same time. All of it together, I guess, is the problem.” It was a little painful being forced to talk about this, but Floyd wasn't letting him get away.

“Yeah. Then finding that one good thing can help stabilize the rest of it.”

Maybe Floyd was right. It *sounded* like it made sense, at least.

When he didn't shoot down the idea, Floyd continued. “You're being a hermit. You spend all your time working here and making money or fucking the night away at the club. Not... you know, knowing people. You're not even on Facebook.”

Chase's stomach twisted with anxiety. “People could find me there.”

“Exactly. So you gotta get out a little in real life, get some real social supports. That guy you hung out with the other day, the one with the artistic family – talk to him. Meet up with guys for fun or hanging out, not just jumping into bed.”

Floyd slept around, too, but to be fair... Floyd seemed a lot happier about it than Chase felt. Or maybe he felt that gnawing pit in his stomach at the end of a night out, too, and he just didn't admit it.

Chase nodded. “Yeah,” he murmured. “Yeah, I'll look up some things.”

"I'll drive you to your first meeting of whatever it is. University's back, so check out the clubs there, too. Some of them take non-students."

"You're determined to see me make friends," Chase laughed. Floyd had been bugging him for months to get out there, but he'd never followed through like now. It was... It was nice to have someone care that much about him, though.

Floyd nodded. "Yeah. We all need 'em." He clapped Chase's back, then leaned in for a brief, manly hug.

Chase clapped Floyd's back, his mind already wandering over the possibilities. Archery sounded kinda fun. For the only other guy here, apart from Jackson, who hadn't yet taken him home, Floyd was pretty cool.

---

"This is going to be the most awkward part of tonight. Fencing isn't just about attacking. It's about maintaining your own personal space, and being aware of it."

Chase grimaced.

"Look at you all. You're not going to die from holding hands a little."

That produced a laugh from the class of a dozen or so fencing newbies who had shown up to the first session of this course. There were three lessons a week, an intense pace. Chase had barely squeaked in to take the last available spot in the course. It had started the day after his conversation with Floyd.

Pair by pair, they reached out to entwine their fingers with each other's. There was awkward, nervous chuckling from the pairs of men. Chase rolled his eyes and ignored it, focusing on his partner's personal space.

They walked toward each other, bending their arms slowly. They got accustomed to how far away they were when their elbows bent.

Already, Chase could see a sword keeping everyone out of his personal space bubble. That was apparently going to be the point of the next lesson.

Although the first lesson was mostly history that he tuned out, however hard he tried to listen, these few exercises were interesting. They played soccer with tennis balls, and then started to learn footwork. They tried to keep the tennis balls between their feet in one

exercise. In another, they passed balls back and forth to each other as they stepped back and forth.

By the time the lesson was over, he found himself more excited for the next lesson than he'd anticipated.

A few of the students stayed behind to ask questions: what kind of swords they'd use, how long it took to learn, and where to buy swords. *That* was what Chase wanted to know. The instructor said the club had some practice gear to provide and then rent after the course was done. Those who liked the aesthetic of weapons were welcome to buy them, but almost all weren't competition-legal.

Chase didn't care. The idea of having a blade in his house made him feel safer. He didn't really care about competition. He just wanted to be able to keep people out of his space.

He smiled as he headed out onto the street, noting how far away objects he passed were – telephone posts, street signs, even parked cars. *In my bubble – outside of my bubble – oh, that one's inside my bubble...*

He'd never had the best sense of spatial dimensions aside from micro-scale proportions on people's bodies. People often startled him by getting close before he even knew it, and it always made his heart leap into his throat. Tonight, he didn't feel anxious walking through the downtown bustle and back to his apartment building.

Something subtle had changed within him at class that evening.



## Jackson

"Look at how far along I am," Jackson grinned. He lowered the heavy wrought iron piece to rest against Cam's living room carpet.

"Oh wow, that whole section is complete, isn't it? It looks finished..."

"Yeah, it's done. That's the whole section between those staircase landings," Jackson told him. "Then I just have to do the section along the top. You like it?"

"What does it look like in place?"

Jackson laughed. "You're just making me work for it, aren't you?" He hauled it up a few steps and over the edge of the bannister. "Now, imagine that the other crappy railings aren't there..."

"Oh, no, I see what you mean. Wow. That'll look stunning," Cam told him sincerely. "Thank you, bro. That's... really cool."

Jackson's chest swelled. He carried the section back downstairs and leaned it behind the couch with the other two. "No problem."

"Will it fit the code?"

"Building code? I already measured like eight times, man."

Cameron frowned. "But it will?"

Jackson groaned. "Yes. I know the codes, man."

"I'm just saying, this is a big custom piece. No builder involved to get the permits and stuff like usual..."

"You're a stickler for the rules, aren't you?" Jackson's temper was heating up, but he tried to take a breath and cool it off.

"Do I need to hire a lead contractor here to keep you in line?" Cam smirked. There was an edge of tension between them that Jackson didn't like. Cam was worried he'd fuck up the spacing between the stairs and open air and fail inspection.

Jackson punched Cameron's arm a little harder than usual. "I'm not gonna fuck up. I've been working with carpenters and inspectors

longer than you *were* a carpenter – for what, one summer?”

Cameron's cheeks flushed red and he took the point. “Yeah. Sorry.”

“Yeah.” Jackson rubbed his chin. “Okay, I gotta blow this popsicle stand. See you later, man.”

“You too.”

Once he was in the backyard, Jackson scowled at the gate as he stepped through it and slid it shut. His little brother usually believed in him, but now he was suddenly questioning him?

Jackson knew it was just Cam being cautious, but it still rankled. If only he *didn't* know the code by heart. He wished he could work mostly on art or armor or fireplace accessories. He didn't love railings and balusters. But the home builders were expanding suburbs rapidly. They built new subdivisions every year. Their jobs were the most consistent and straightforward... and they paid well.

They just bored the crap out of him.

He knew when he started to get annoyed easily it was time to step back from work. He went to his forge to shut everything down. Ryan and Kevin and the guys were all busy and he hadn't heard from Chase since they'd set up his dating profile. He sent a text.

*Wanna hang out?*

He didn't know why his heart thumped as he waited for a response.

## Chase

“En garde.”

Chase's hand almost shook, even though the flexible sword in his hand was surprisingly light. It wasn't even as heavy as his tattoo gun. The tip was covered in a bright orange cover, yet it felt... far more deadly.

His opponent, Belle, was clad in a mask and heavy clothing. She looked far more intimidating than he'd expected. He swallowed hard, trying to keep his feet pointed like he'd been taught. He imagined the tennis ball between them. Seconds later, that was forgotten. Belle lunged forward and he hastily brought his blade across to parry the blow.

Every second felt like years when he was waiting for the next blow.

Twice more his opponent tried before he got up the courage to lunge, too. Belle had fenced before, and it showed in the smooth way she moved.

“That's it, Chase,” their teacher, Mike, called out. “Keep going.”

Belle lunged again. This time, he noticed the moment the lightweight foil entered his personal space. The moment he'd parried her blow, he countered and the orange tip pressed against her chest plate.

“Whoa, good,” she praised, and her voice sounded surprised but pleased for him.

Mike echoed, “Good. Both of you stand down. You two, you're next.”

As they rotated off and set down their foils, Belle lifted her mask and smiled at Chase as soon as his was off. “That was great.”

Chase was still shaking. His adrenaline was through the roof. His thick protective equipment weighed him down and grounded him at least. “Thanks.”

“You go to school here?”

“No, but I just moved here a few months ago.”

Belle smiled, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Cool. I can't believe

this is only the third lesson. I've learned a lot."

"Really? You seemed pretty good already."

"Oh, no, I forgot most of what I learned before," Belle laughed. "But it does come more naturally to you after lessons, I guess. You're coming along fast too."

"Thanks."

They turned their attention back to the current pair to try and study them. Chase smiled as he leaned back against the wall. Maybe he could pick up a couple friends here, too.

By the time the session was done, Chase was ready to go, though. When he got a text message from Jackson asking him to hang out, he stopped mid-walk to Tim Horton's to answer.

*Sure :) I was just about to grab supper.*

*Let's meet up for supper?* Jackson answered.

"Yes," Chase whispered under his breath and answered, *Sure!* It would give him the chance to propose a crazy little idea. He told himself that was the only reason he was excited. Something about the way his heart warmed up said otherwise.

---

Jackson was dressed up nicely and waiting at the door to the restaurant. Chase's heart unexpectedly fluttered. It had been a long time since his last date.

Not that he wanted one with Jackson.

Chase cleared his throat and raised a hand to wave. He tried not to notice Jackson's clean, dark jeans, freshly-styled hair, or the ironed collared shirt. This was a step up from the usual t-shirt and jeans.

"Hey," Jackson smiled, and for a moment, there was that hesitation again. *Just like when he saw me off last time.*

Chase broke the tension by smiling and clapping Jackson's arm. He pulled open the door for them both. If Jackson didn't want things to be romantic between them, he wouldn't make this awkward. "How's it going?"

Jackson relaxed and offered him a smile. "Thanks. Not bad, just finished up some work for my brother. It's nice getting to swap work,

even if it's a bit more of the same. Table for two, please.”

Once they were seated, Chase leaned in across the table and folded his arms. “More of the same?”

“Always staircases,” Jackson groaned. “I'm getting tired of them. I just want to make, I don't know... armor.”

Chase's cheeks turned pink. This was going to sound so cheeky, but... “Well, I have an idea. Um, I kind of want... a sword...”

“Yeah?” Jackson clearly saw where this was going.

“We could trade, somehow... if you're interested. I mean, back when we met, you said you were thinking of getting a secret tattoo. I don't know if you did that yet--” Jackson shook his head, so Chase continued, “--but I could help.”

“In exchange for a sword? What kind? I can't do copyrighted stuff,” Jackson told him upfront. “And I can't do something you can actually fight with – at least, it'd take me a long time.”

Chase blinked and laughed. “No, I'm not going for Lord of the Rings-style swords,” he reassured Jackson.

“You'd be surprised how many guys want to pretend they're in it,” Jackson grinned.

Their waiter took their drink orders. Jackson and Chase quickly picked their meals to order at the same time.

Once the waiter left, Chase looked back at Jackson. “But, no, kind of the style of an old-fashioned fencing sword, I guess?”

“Ahh. Foil? Sabre? I can't do everything,” Jackson warned.

“I don't have a particular style in mind. I know it's not competition-legal.”

“I can't do those either.”

“Right, right. I just want something to... I don't know, make me feel a bit safer. If I can bring it to some medieval festival someday, so much the better. But something I can display and... know I have around.”

Jackson looked at him oddly for a moment before he nodded. “Well, I want a family tattoo done.”

*Aww, he's sweet. I hope he doesn't regret that, though.* “Oh, family tattoos aren't always a good idea,” Chase laughed under his breath. “So many people wind up getting laser removal when they have family fights.”

"I'm not fuckin' doing that," Jackson answered, his voice much sharper than Chase expected.

Chase flinched hard.

Instantly, Jackson frowned an apology. He reached out with an open hand across the table to touch his arm. When he touched him, Chase's nerves crackled with pleasure. "Sorry, man. No, I didn't mean that at you."

"No, sorry," Cameron murmured. "I hit a nerve...?"

Jackson hesitated before he nodded. "I want it as a family thing... before my brother's heart surgery."

Now Chase felt like crap. His eyes widened. "Is it Cam?"

"Yep."

Chase winced. No matter how he felt about family, he ached for Jackson. He could see why Jackson was touchy. "Shit. I'm sorry. That has to be stressful."

"It... It hasn't been easy." Jackson looked a little more raw than Chase had seen him – like he'd looked when he talked about online dating. "It's called CPVT, have you heard of it?" Chase shook his head. "Well, it's a bit rarer. They took months to diagnose it because it usually shows up way earlier. I mean, occasionally you get older people diagnosed. Apparently it's usually *after* they go into cardiac arrest. In the States, I'm sure they would've diagnosed it in days. But because the public health system in Canada is--"

"--shit," Chase chimed in, nodding his agreement. "Oh yeah."

"It took a really good specialist and he had to go back to Ontario in July, middle of his work season..."

Jackson's passion about his brother made Chase smile with familiarity. If any doctor tried to fuck over his little brother... but he didn't have a say in that anymore. *Not the moment. This is about Jackson, not me.*

Jackson cut himself off, then cleared his throat. "Anyway, they know what he needs now. They think it won't have a lot of risk, but... he kinda doesn't have a choice."

The waiter came back with their drinks. Chase took a good few gulps of beer to wash out the bitter taste of regret for his ill-timed joke. Then, he leaned forward again. "Sorry I said that."

Jackson seemed to have to think for a moment to remember. "What?"

Oh, no, I shouldn't have snapped. I get a little defensive about the people I care about. But you're right, overall. Like, boyfriends' names and stuff are stupid."

Chase laughed at the honesty. "Well... yeah, I think so, but I'll do them if they've been together for decades or something. That's different."

"You can know you want to spend your life with someone in weeks, though."

It was Chase's turn to feel hot under the collar. He tugged it a little as he sipped his beer, then shook his head. "You can *think* you know them."

"But if you both have the same approach to a relationship..."

"Like knowing that they told you the truth about themselves? What if they were lying?" This wasn't even an argument, oddly enough. Chase hadn't had a passionate discussion that wasn't a shouting fight in forever.

Jackson was sitting up straight, too. He looked much less stressed and livelier now. "Well, if they weren't deceiving you about the kind of person they are. I mean, if they clearly want to work to grow the relationship and be honest from the start..."

"Well, yeah, but they could just be... I don't know, tricking you."

Jackson furrowed his brow. "How? By saying they want to be real and then... not being real?"

"Yeah, exactly."

Jackson hummed and leaned back in his chair. His lips pursed, and Chase watched them without meaning to. "Yeah, I see your point. But – I dunno. I like to give people the benefit of the doubt."

He was sweet all over. Chase just hoped not too many guys would take advantage of him while he was dating. Speaking of which...

"Have you met anyone from online?"

"Nah, not yet," Jackson shook his head. "I haven't been looking. I don't know, I just think it's weird. Like, how would I know if I'm going to click with someone and have conversations like this on our first date or not?"

Chase felt heat flush to his cheeks. *He* was being used as an example of someone who clicked with Jackson? Something about that made his heart flutter in a familiar way that he hadn't felt in a long time. Was it

possible Jackson thought he was hot, too?

*No way... He's always been a gentleman. Wait. Unless that's just the way he is...*

Chase leaned forward a little, but he didn't have the balls to follow through on the response he wanted to give. Instead, he answered, "You try it out just to see."

*I... I wouldn't mind trying him out. Just to see.*

Chase drained the rest of his beer, his gaze sliding to their food order that was now arriving. That made for an easy subject change, at least.

They lapsed into comfortable conversation for dinner. Jackson agreed to come over tomorrow evening after the tattoo shop closed. They'd talk then about the services they wanted to trade.

Chase couldn't get that sudden thought out of his mind the whole time, even as he waved goodbye.

Why was Jackson suddenly catching his eye in a way he hadn't thought possible? He *had* to stop thinking about his friends like this.



## Jackson

“Hey, Chase. How's it goin'?”

Was that too casual? Or too flirty? Was he too early? Jackson tried to stop his mind from wandering and worrying over what he was doing seeing Chase again so soon. He was definitely *not* interested in Chase, right? Not if Chase wasn't interested in him...

The way Chase smiled at him in greeting made him wonder. His body warmed up as Chase's brown eyes lit up at the sight of him. Chase unfolded his arms and straightened up from where he leaned against the counter. “Hi! Good, you?” His smile was so cute.

“Great, thanks. This too early?”

“No, no. It's usually slow for the last bit. People don't come in to get work done *right* before closing. Just to book appointments, if that.”

Jackson nodded and approached the counter, setting his sketchbook down on it. “So, ready to go over what we're looking for?”

“Yeah. Hold on, let me grab my book.” Chase stepped into the back office. In the meantime, Jackson flipped through the photo albums on the counter.

One was labeled *Floyd* and one *Teri*, but there wasn't one for Chase. Were these the tattooists? When Chase returned, Jackson pointed them out. “None for you?”

Chase's eyes flickered up to Jackson's, his shoulders rising. The defensive moment was gone as fast as that before he pointed to his arms. “There's my portfolio.”

Jackson laughed. “I bet you use that line a lot.”

“I do, yeah,” Chase joined in the laugh. He came around the counter to stand next to Jackson, flipping his own sketchbook open.

“Can I check them out?”

“Oh, yeah, of course.” Chase leaned his hip on the counter and offered his arm, turning it this way and that. Jackson sidled closer, trying not to brush too close to him.

A lion stood proud on one arm, its every contour rippling with majesty. It blended into a rippling series of dusky blue and lavender clouds, then pale red roses. Further down, toward Chase's wrist, thorny green branches were entwined with the roses.

On Chase's other arm, a peacock spread its wings in flight. The tail feathers wrapped intricately around his elbow all the way down to his wrist. The same dusky blue and lavender clouds set it off in the background.

Just as when they'd first met, Jackson marveled over the smooth swirls of that style. "Wow," Jackson murmured. "That's... that's really detailed. Did you do all this?"

"I had to get some people to help me fill in a few bits and hold mirrors and stuff. Some spots were an ordeal," Chase laughed. "But most of it."

"I'd like that kind of style on mine, and those kinds of colors."

"All right. Well, we'll talk about it," Chase agreed. "Do you have any concepts?"

Jackson shook his head. "Just some rough ideas." He flipped through his book in search of them. It was always risky to flip through a sketchbook, though. He tried to flip past certain pages quickly.

"Okay, I usually don't comment, but..." Chase spoke up, his tone teasing. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours. If they're not people you know..."

*Oh man, he thinks I draw French boys.* Jackson blushed. "They're not specific people." He flipped back to his nude sketches. There weren't many – he didn't really draw people aside from modeling his rare human sculptures. He liked to find organic shapes for metal sometimes, though...

"Not bad," Chase murmured, leaning in for a better look at a drawing of a naked man stretched out on his side along the floor. "Did you study drawing people?"

"No, not beyond a basic sketching class."

"That's pretty good."

Jackson smiled at the compliment. It wasn't over-the-top, but it was sincere praise. "Thank you. What about you?"

Chase had been waiting for him to ask. He beamed and flipped open his notebook, turning back a good chunk of pages.

Oh, shit. His men were *hunks*. They were all strong and posed in masculine ways – one from the side, looking sideways and flexing an arm. Another was from behind, the man's head rolled back and arms spread. A third showed him from the front, curling a strong bicep across his muscled chest.

“Wow,” Jackson grinned, his gaze returning to his own page. He'd drawn willowy men with strong cheekbones, keen eyes, and a little light muscle. His men actually looked a little like Chase... And Chase had drawn men like him.

Chase had reached the same conclusion at the same moment. His lips parted as he gazed at Jackson's sketch, then at Jackson and his own notebook.

He was flustered. Jackson had never seen him flustered before. Red crept up his angular cheeks, his pretty pink lips looking...

Oh, no. Jackson wanted to kiss him.

“That based on anyone in particular?” Jackson asked. He hoped his voice didn't sound strained.

“My ex,” Chase snorted with laughter. “But he was an asshole, so I don't mind you looking. It's not an exact drawing anyway.”

Jackson was startled into a laugh. “Oh. He looks tough.”

Chase's smile faded as he looked down at the page. He flipped forward to a blank one again. “Yeah. He was.”

Jackson didn't like the way he was shutting down. He was starting to get a horrible sneaking suspicion that this guy had been bad news.

*Not again.* His little brother Cam had split up from his ex for the umpteenth time earlier that summer, just before meeting Noah. Jackson had talked Cam into blocking that asshole's number at last. Not that he was worried now; Cam was utterly smitten with Noah.

But Jackson knew how to handle this: with a light touch. He let the subject drop and instead teased, “Nice buff men.”

Chase looked up, smiling. “Thanks,” he laughed. “You can tell my type of man, huh? Yours are a lot more... willowy.”

“They are,” Jackson agreed, and pulled back from Chase enough to look him up and down. He winked. “More like you, but not as handsome.”

Chase's pink blush deepened to a dark red. His cheeks rounded in

pleasure that he was trying not to show. Instead, he stuttered, “S-So, did you have any, uh, ideas for your tattoo?”

*That's adorable.* Jackson grinned at his sudden bashful behavior. “A few. There's a coat of arms for the Riley family, since we're all from Ireland and northern England.”

“Oh, the old shield on your arm kinda thing?”

“Not exactly.” Jackson grinned. “Um, ours involves a severed hand dripping blood, held up by two pissed-off lions...”

Chase's eyebrows shot up and he laughed. “Oh, you don't want something really morbid? I mean, I can do bones poking out—”

“No,” Jackson spoke over him, pushing Chase away from him lightly. “Ugh, no, that's *not* my style.”

“I didn't think so,” Chase laughed louder, elbowing him back playfully. Their shoulders brushed and Chase shivered as he leaned in across his sketchbook, uncapping his pen with his lips.

Jackson stared at the red lips wrapped around the smooth plastic pen cap. He imagined them elsewhere for a moment. He quickly looked at Chase's eyes when Chase prompted, “So, the lions?”

“Yeah. The colors are green and gold, maybe yellow.”

“Green and yellow lions?”

He was already drawing in quick, confident strokes, outlining a lion from the side just as they appeared on so many family crests. How many had he tattooed already? Or did he just draw from memory? God, he was good. Jackson was a bit jealous.

“It doesn't have to be exactly that,” Jackson told him. “That's just one... source of inspiration. I mean, a realistic lion like you've got on your shoulder would be epic. Or there's inside family jokes I could get done.”

Chase hummed, eying the lion for a moment. Then, he nodded and straightened up. “How about I doodle a few ideas and show them to you soon? Text me with any suggestions to add to the design or consider. Family jokes or names or anything.”

Jackson gave him a grateful smile. “Thanks. I'm pretty open to ideas. I wouldn't mind having something... weapon-y, or otherwise blacksmith-y.” Jackson became aware that he was still leaning sideways against the counter facing Chase. They were just a little closer than friends usually stood, and Jackson's heart raced.

Chase raised an eyebrow, leaning in a little further still. “Blacksmith-y? Is that a word?” he teased. His dark eyes fell to Jackson's lips before he dragged his gaze back up to Jackson's eyes again.

*He's flirting, too...!* Jackson bit back his moment of excitement. He licked his lips and nodding. “It is now. Uh, speaking of which...”

It was his turn to pull back a little so he could flip through his book. He had photos added to the book with little corner squares near his concept sketches.

When he found some swords, he showed Chase. “These are a few that I did last year for one collector... and around here, I have another one... ah, here. I should have brought my portfolio book. That's back at the workshop.”

“Hm,” Chase rubbed his chin, leaning in across Jackson.

He smelled like leather and hand sanitizer and something fresh and spicy...

A chill ran down Jackson's spine. He tried to lean sideways and watch Chase trace the pattern along the hilt with a finger. He tried *not* to look at the short hair at the back of Chase's neck that he ached to feel against his lips.

*Shit. I want him.*

“I like that, I think. But I'd like to see other examples.”

“Wanna come back to my workshop?” Jackson offered as casually as he could.

He didn't miss the way Chase licked his lips and nipped the lower lip. “Yeah, sure. The shop's just about closed now. You'll just have to wait for me to close up.”

“Fine with me,” Jackson assured him. “I'll wait outside and be your burly security guy,” he added, winking again.

“Oh, my hero.” Chase grinned, returning to sketching a few more lions – the heads, the full bodies curled up, one holding a sword... oh, that just looked dumb.

Jackson snickered under his breath.

“Yeah, I didn't expect you to take to that one,” Chase grinned. “Sword-fighting lions? No?” He added a second lion, lying on the ground, and drops spurting out of the second lion's chest...

“No!” Jackson laughed and shoved Chase, making him streak the paper with his pen tip. “No, that's horrible!”

Chase laughed richly. He capped his pen and tucked it into his pocket. “Go wait outside. I'll be there in a couple minutes.”

Jackson grinned, brushing his hand down Chase's arm from his shoulder to his elbow. He grabbed his sketchbook. “Yes, sir,” he teased. The door rattled shut behind him as he stepped out into the mild August evening.

Jackson drew a deep breath to try and calm himself.

He'd made Chase get flustered, but something about Chase was getting to him, too. Was this just because they were both single and around each other? But... no, it wasn't just that.

The conversation last night at the restaurant had shown him a new passion. Chase had only ever been calm and collected around Jackson before. That spark of fiery attitude had made Jackson stop and pay attention.

For some reason, Jackson was even enchanted with Chase's morbid sense of humor. He knew Chase only did it because it got to him, but somehow that made him grin even more to himself. It was like buddies messing around with each other, but... there was more. Especially every time they brushed together.

Something told him it was going to be hot at the forge, and he couldn't wait.

## Chase

Chase was fucked.

He'd found it hard enough to resist flirting with Jackson *before* the gorgeous, intense, sweet man started to flirt with him. Now, it was damn near impossible. Hypersexual was a good description for Chase, but he hadn't cared before.

The one problem? Jackson had said in his dating profile that he wanted a relationship. Chase didn't do relationships.

Chase drummed his fingers on his sketchbook as they walked from the locked-up tattoo shop to Jackson's house. After the initial few moments of awkward silence, Jackson started to chat about tattoos he'd seen on people. Chase took the chance to describe a few common styles and locations.

It was comfortable enough, but there was much more tension in the air. When they looked at each other or their hands bumped, a jolt ran down Chase's spine. He could see Jackson's breath catch, too.

They reached Jackson's house within minutes. Chase hung back to flip through Jackson's portfolio while Jackson lit the forge.

"I'll show you a few common patterns and ways of manipulating the metal." Jackson crouched in front of the box, watching the flames. "We'll see if we can find something you like. I have some ideas..."

"How long have you done this?"

"Oh, a decade. I started at seventeen."

*He's twenty-seven? Damn, no wonder he's in such good shape. He's in the prime of his life.* Chase watched with mixed arousal and fascination as Jackson chose a metal rod. He heated it, cut it in two, and twisted it to form a hilt-like shape before holding it back in the flames by a pair of huge tongs.

"I'm twenty-five," Chase told him. "I've only been tattooing since I was twenty-one, though. Well, I started at eighteen, but I got licensed at twenty-one."

“Four years' experience is still a long time if you're a good artist. Like you are.” Jackson kept his grip firm on the tongs as he turned with the glowing hot metal. He dipped one end in water and screwed that end into a clamp. “So, I'm assuming this sword is for show rather than use. At least, I hope so. I do swords for medieval re-enactors, of which you'll find a lot in your fencing group.”

Chase shivered. “Ohh. Yeah, I'm not gonna stab people,” he promised. “I just want to... I don't know, feel more secure. I still wouldn't use it unless we're talking a life or death home invader situation.”

Jackson nodded. “All right. But you're not planning on swordplay in combat at reenactments?”

“No. Not at all.” Chase almost laughed at the idea of him trying to reenact anything from history. It just didn't interest him.

“Then I can make the hilt beautiful and only a bit functional.” He was twisting with his tongs, bending the metal around freehand. He made small, controlled movements until it swooped up, looped around, and came back down again. Then, four sharp twists around the center. “The blade would be here... you can come closer.”

The glowing metal was terrifying to watch even from the other end of the workshop. Chase swallowed hard and stood up, watching Jackson's expression soften with amusement. He jutted his chin out in response and walked around the table toward the clamped metal.

“That's it,” Jackson encouraged. “I won't let it drop on you,” he winked, stepping back and shaking off his gloves. He unbuttoned his collared plaid shirt to reveal his usual gray t-shirt and Chase resisted the urge to laugh. It was a bit like a Superman moment. *Supersmith, maybe.*

Chase forgot about the glowing hot metal between them. Jackson's pecs rippled beneath clingy fabric. Chase itched to grab that shirt and pull it up for a better look. “Nice.”

Jackson laughed and Chase smirked. He looked back at the metal. “You're good at twisting rods.” *I wish I could say I hadn't meant that...* He licked his lips.

“I've had a lot of practice,” Jackson answered in a low, smooth voice. He slipped those firm, callused hands back into his leather gloves before picking up his tongs. Once he unclamped the metal, he brought it back to the forge, sliding the rod into the flames. “I haven't made a sword in a while. I might be out of practice.”



"If it takes you longer, it takes you longer," Chase murmured. "I'm patient. It'll take me a while to come up with your design, too."

Wood smoke was all he could smell, the hissing and crackling of the forge all he could hear. The tension crackled between them.

Then, Jackson turned, the metal clamped in his hand again, and dipped the end in water. He didn't even flinch as the water sizzled and hissed just under his hands.

Chase was starting to get uncomfortably aroused. Jackson screwed the metal into a clamp again, grabbing tongs and beginning to twist.

White-hot metal gave way like butter. Somehow Jackson's twists were precise enough or the metal cool enough that the metal didn't give way. It twisted perfectly, spirals appearing in the metal like they'd been etched there. "Oh, wow," Chase breathed out.

Jackson grinned. "I like that reaction. I thought I'd go for something elegant and flowing. Match your tattoos."

Chase ran a hand down his arm absently, over where he knew the lion was. He'd admired the curves and swoops in the design of the hockey player statue Jackson had done for the art show where they'd met. Seeing him make those curves in real life, albeit on a much smaller scale, was almost surreal.

Jackson didn't hesitate to grab his hammer or tongs. He reshaped bits of metal with smooth, controlled movements and intently focused eyes.

He focused completely on his work, his stance at the ready. His biceps flexed with the weight of the hammer in his hand... Sweat trickled down his back, gleaming on his forehead.

Chase could only imagine Jackson's bare body on the sheets, making love on a hot summer night.

He was half-hard already. *Fuck. As if I didn't just get laid the other day...* He shifted to adjust himself in his pocket, then resumed watching Jackson work.

"Something like... this."

Chase swallowed and looked back at the hilt, which was condensed now. "Oh, wow," he whispered. Somehow, he'd tuned out the last minute of Jackson's work completely. He'd been too focused on watching his body move fluidly with his tools, like he'd been born with them in his hands.

He burned for the same kind of firm, certain touches.

Now, the strands of metal swooped around each other in a tighter space. They were hammered closer together as the whole half-sphere of metal seemed shorter but wider, offering more space underneath. It was cooling off, back to dark gray all over with only hints of red lines along the insides of the twists.

“It's only a rough prototype--”

“I love it,” Chase whispered, his eyes lingering on all the details.

A smile broke across Jackson's face. “Yeah? We'll decide on the look of your blade and the grip next.”

Jackson loosened the clamp and set the metal aside on the table, then slipped his gloves off.

Chase instinctively picked up the portfolio to offer Jackson. Instead, he found Jackson stepping closer – into his personal space bubble. Jackson waited for just a moment, his eyes flickering between Chase's with the question.

Chase stepped closer, too.

Jackson's hand cupped his chin, his thumb resting against the edge of Chase's jaw. He leaned down the two inches that separated them and their lips met.

*Oh, yes.*

He hadn't been kissed like this in... forever. Jackson's lips were warm and soft, the grip of his fingers rough and firm.

Chase pushed himself against Jackson's body and crushed himself close to kiss Jackson *hard*. His hand rose to run up Jackson's back. Chase shivered at the muscles he felt along Jackson's back and shoulder blades. He boldly rested the other hand in the curve of Jackson's lower back, just above his ass.

Jackson's hand closed around the back of Chase's head. He caressed his neck and shoulder. Chase could feel him, half-hard, pressing into his thigh through layers of jeans.

Chase wanted that.

He sucked on Jackson's lower lip, his eyes flickering open. Jackson's delicate lashes fluttered up close with distant pleasure as his chest rose and fell quickly.

Every time Chase flicked his tongue across the skin or nipped it, Jackson's breathing caught in his chest. It was fucking sexy to watch.

Chase ran one hand up along Jackson's stomach and chest now, taking his time to feel the hard muscles under his palm. Fuck, he was built like a Greek god. He slipped his hand under Jackson's shirt and Jackson shivered at first, then pressed forward into Chase's hand.

When his fingertips brushed Jackson's nipple, Jackson's whole body clenched for a moment. Their thighs pressed together firmly enough that he felt Jackson's cock twitching. That was the *sexiest fucking thing*.

Chase wasn't ashamed to admit Jackson was getting to him more than any guy in recent history. He wanted to make Jackson feel good, take his mind off work and stress...

He gave Jackson a few last lingering kisses. Their teeth and tongues and lips worked together as they breathed hard. Chase's body burned with desire to be lifted off his feet and fucked by this man against the nearest wall. Instead, he shoved Jackson's chest until he'd backed him up against it. He dropped to his knees on the hard concrete floor.

"Oh, Christ," Jackson whispered. His barrel-like chest heaved with arousal as he reached down to rub himself through denim. "You're so fucking *hot*, Chase."

Chase grinned. "Sure that's not the forge?" It was hot in here, especially in the dead of August, but he didn't only want to strip down because of *that*. Watching Jackson's passion come out in every little movement had turned the simmering heat under his skin up to an uncontrollable boil.

"Funny." Jackson sucked in another quiet breath. Chase unbuttoned his jeans, slid the zipper down, and tugged them down a little before he pulled down the waistband. The base of his shaft came into view.

God, he was big.

The full length was well over his hand width, so he gripped the shaft and stroked it. The pink head gleamed. The rounded tip looked deliciously moist from grinding himself off against Chase's hip.

The distinctively salty taste of pre-come hit his tongue as he leaned in to run the flat of his tongue across the head.

Jackson kneaded his shoulders the whole time. Barely-restrained noises, probably stifled moans, slipped through the air.

That was all the encouragement he needed to dip his head and run his

tongue tip from shaft to tip, around, and back down again.

The velvety weight in his hand stiffened at the extra attention, going from half-mast to fully erect in almost the blink of an eye. The stiffening under his mouth and the very close-up view were the hottest.

Jackson's thighs tensed and his stomach tightened. His fingertips dug into the flesh of Chase's shoulder. The second time Chase did that, another quiet grunt escaped the back of Jackson's throat. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, biting back whatever words he had.

Chase scooted closer between Jackson's legs and knelt up a little straighter. Oh, the size of this delicious cock! When he licked back up to the head, this time, he closed his lips around the flushed head. He sucked at the sensitive slit for a moment, then kept his lips tight around the shaft. He bobbed his head down.

"Y-Yeah..." Jackson breathed out hoarsely. He kneaded Chase's shoulder rhythmically now. Fingernails dug into Chase's shoulder and he knew he was on the right track.

Chase took in the hot, throbbing shaft easily. He tilted his head just a little further with each inch to make sure it slid across his tongue to the back of his throat. He sucked in his cheeks, bobbing his head back up, then set into a quicker rhythm up and down the shaft.

Jackson's thighs quivered. He slid his hand up from Chase's shoulder to tangle in the hair at the back of Chase's head. He probably so desperately wanted to fuck Chase's mouth, but he stopped himself. His breathing came in short gasps as Chase sucked his cock.

Chase flickered his gaze up Jackson's body for the first time.

Sure, Jackson was stunning normally, but Jackson was indescribably beautiful leaning up against the wall, his legs spread. The back of one hand was on the wall above his head. His biceps were rippling, and his chest heaved. His gaze was focused on Chase.

"Mmm," Chase moaned around the shaft, flickering his tongue around the head. He teased that sensitive spot underneath the shaft before continuing to draw his mouth up and down.

Jackson growled under his breath. His cock was throbbing, so hot and salty, with just a hint of bitterness. His hips kept moving in the tiniest jerks like he was forcing them back against the wall despite himself. Chase let one hand rest on Jackson's hip and tugged it. He kept his head still and glanced up at him to encourage him to move.

“You sure?”

Chase's eyes narrowed with amusement, but he kept his mouth wrapped around the base of Jackson's cock. His nose was buried in the hair at the base of the shaft. *My mouth's a bit full, you.*

Jackson's cheeks were red as he pushed his hips forward once, then twice... A few thrusts later, he got into the rhythm of it.

Fuck, the only thing better would be having this hot man grab his cheeks harder. Chase wanted to feel his desperate desire to squirt his passion down Chase's throat...

As Jackson approached the edge, his balls drew tighter and his breathing stuttered more. His hips moved faster and it was harder to breathe.

Chase didn't give a fuck. Jackson was the hottest guy he'd sucked off in years, and he wasn't going to let bodily needs get in his way.

“You – you gotta finish,” Jackson whispered moments later. His voice was hoarse and broken with pleasure. “Or else I'm gonna bruise your throat.”

Chase nearly laughed, but he managed not to. He just pressed his palm to Jackson's stomach to slam him back against the wall. He aggressively sucked in his lips around the shaft again, bobbing his head up and down. He wanted to give him quick, ruthless enveloping warmth and wetness that he was certain would get Jackson there...

Jackson's groan echoed around the workshop. His hips pushed forward again and stuttered, thighs and stomach clenching. Chase's hand was still pressed against Jackson's chest, and he playfully tweaked Jackson's nipple.

“Y-Yes, oh, *fuck*, yes!” Jackson grunted. His shaft swelled, pulsated, and then... quick squirts of that glorious liquid, milky and thick and rich, almost sweet. It was the same baking soda base taste as every other guy, but there was something a little different, too.

Chase's fingertip trailed around Jackson's nipple and played over the nub lightly. “Hnh!” Jackson's whole body shivered with apparently pleasurable over stimulation.

Chase's throat bobbed. He swallowed each splatter of liquid against the back of his tongue and throat. He kept his mouth tight and bobbed his head to ease Jackson through his climax.

When Jackson's hips went still and his breathing started to steady,

Chase finally drew his mouth off the softening shaft. Chase knelt back to wipe his mouth and swallow a few more times.

“Oh, Jesus, Chase,” Jackson whispered, his eyes wide. His cheeks were still red, his stomach heaving as he tried to catch his breath.

Chase loved that reaction. It was like Jackson didn't take a second of what Chase had done for granted.

“Th-Thanks,” Jackson added with a shaky laugh, and Chase laughed, too. How sweet.

He took Jackson's offered hand and rose to his feet. “No problem,” he teased.

Already, reality set in again. He was so hard himself, but he could wait 'til he got home. He hadn't meant to be so pushy, to demand Jackson's kisses and his pleasure... Jackson was still staring at him wide-eyed as he tucked his cock back into his jeans.

*I just fucked up our friendship, didn't I?*

“Uh, I should probably get going...” Chase didn't even fully understand why he had the strong desire to flee; he just did.

“Wait,” Jackson murmured as Chase took a step back. He stepped forward to stay close, reaching out to take Chase's hand. “May I please return the favor?”

*What?* Chase hadn't expected that.

“Uh...”

“I'd like to, if you're okay with it,” Jackson added firmly. His gaze flickered between Chase's eyes. The way he watched Chase like he *knew* him, knew all the fears and worries playing on his mind... It was almost unnerving, but it was blindingly hot at the same time.

Chase swallowed hard. “Okay,” he whispered, barely even sure what he was agreeing to. It had been ages since a guy had blown him, longer still since he'd come from it. Fuck, this could be so awkward.

Then again, he'd already taken the most awkward step in their relationship. He'd grabbed Jackson, kissed him, and sucked him off on the spot. Jackson couldn't possibly make things *more* awkward now.

And... something about Jackson made him feel secure enough to agree to it.

*It's like I know him already. That sounds crazy. I can't tell him that.*

"You're gorgeous," Jackson whispered. For a moment, Chase saw Antonio from the club the other night. But Jackson was watching him in the light of day – well, of the workshop – and asking him so politely if he could suck him off.

Chase knew he was blushing. He shifted from foot to foot, caught off guard and not sure what to say to that. "Th-Thanks," he laughed. "Glad I give such good head."

"Oh, you do," Jackson marveled. A smile curled his lips as he pressed close to Chase, his hands tracing down Chase's sides. Jackson's hands, when they squeezed his ass, were immensely distracting.

Chase shivered, pressing his thigh into Jackson's leg and grinding against him.

Then, Jackson's hands curled around his upper thighs, right by his ass, lifting him right off his feet.

"Oh, fuck," Chase exclaimed. He grabbed Jackson's shoulders as Jackson carried him across the workshop to the table where he'd been sitting with the portfolio.

Jackson laughed, shoving Chase onto his back on the table. He swept his portfolio book onto the chair. "You like your men big and strong, don't you?" he teased.

"Yeah." Chase's cheeks burned at the memory of Jackson looking at his sketches, looking back at his own and comparing them to Chase's body. Chase had done the same with his own sketches and Jackson's body...

Even knowing Jackson was into his type, he hadn't known Jackson was into *him*. And they might have only been casual friends, but this man was a catch.

"And good with their hands?" Jackson cupped his bulge through denim, his strong palm rubbing along the hardened shaft.

Chase rolled his head back with a moan of need. His toes curled into his shoes as he hooked his legs around the legs of the table.

Jackson crouched over him. He leaned across the table, bracing one strong arm over his head to kiss him hard.

In response, Chase grabbed Jackson's cheeks and pulled him closer. Their lips melded once more into a smooth, erotic dance of warm skin teasing skin. Jackson's kisses made his skin light up. Every nerve ending was suddenly more sensitive to Jackson's nipples brushing his

own, or Jackson's hand wandering up his stomach...

"Oh, my – oh my God," Chase moaned, his cock aching. His head spun at what it was like to be touched and cherished, and not just in the moments before getting fucked. If Jackson could do *that* again already, he'd was a miracle or he was lying about his age.

But Jackson wasn't out for pleasure for himself. The thought was nearly overwhelming. Chase let go of Jackson, thrilled that Jackson kept kissing him in rough, wet, open-mouthed kisses. He ran his hands up over Jackson's rippling arms and down his back. Jackson's body was warm and pleasurable against his needy erection, but it wasn't enough.

"Oh, God, please," Chase moaned. Jackson slid a little further away, kissing his way – tortuously slow – down Chase's body. Chase squirmed against the table. He wished those lips were wrapping around his bare nipple or pressed against bare skin... Jackson teased him through his shirt, all the way down to his stomach.

Jackson crouched over his groin. He raised his hips to let Jackson unbutton his jeans and slide them down to his thighs. His cock popped free in the warm air, his heart pounding with nervous anticipation.

Roughened fingers slid up under his shirt this time, feeling him up just as he'd touched Jackson in the heat of the moment. Unlike Chase had done, Jackson didn't tease him, though.

A hot, almost unbearably stimulating mouth closed around the tip of his cock. Then, Chase was enveloped by that same wet heat all the way down his shaft. His whole body throbbed and thrummed with desire. "Y-Yes...!"

Jackson groaned quietly. The vibrations sent little shivers through Chase's thighs as he braced his feet around the edge of the table legs. It kept him almost flat on the table... Almost. Not so he couldn't push up once or twice between those supple, smooth lips, though.

It was impossible to hold out for long under this attention. The wet heat sucking tightly around his sensitive skin was hard to handle. Then, Jackson pulled his head back to rub the rest of the shaft with one hand and firmly suck the tip...

Yet Chase couldn't quite finish, still so wrapped up in his own anxiety and inexperience. His heart pounded and his chest heaved for breath. It was like he was hanging on the precipice. His whole body quivered or flinched every time Jackson's touch ignited nerves along his skin or made his stomach tense. But he couldn't quite get there.



His chest pounded harder and harder with nameless worries, even as his body still quivered on that knife's edge of need. A couple of minutes of torture later, he whispered, "Christ, I might – I might take a while..."

Jackson sucked his mouth off the length and licked it as he whispered, "That's all right." His voice rumbled in a deep, desiring growl. "I got all night."

Oh, fuck, of course he was patient and sweet and so fucking hot...

And he sounded like he'd meant it. Chase relaxed against the table again, sharply moaning when Jackson's wet mouth enveloped him again.

This time, within minutes, he felt tingles building under his skin. The electric chills were so welcome. He relished them, grinning as he rolled his head back and squeezed his eyes shut. As his cock twitched, his muscles quivering, he clenched his hand around Jackson's shoulder. "Nnh...! Oh, J-Jackson...! Yes!"

Jackson's warm wetness was enough to take him over the edge. Jackson kept bobbing his head as Chase unconsciously thrust his hips. Chase opened his eyes enough to hazily watch... and Jackson was watching *him* like the most beautiful thing he'd ever had on his workshop table.

Chase's cheeks were already flushed, his chest rising and falling rapidly. "Oh, man," he whispered as Jackson pulled his head up and swallowed again. It was a good thing he was sprawled across the table. He felt utterly boneless for the few moments it took to pull himself together.

Then, he grunted and hauled himself up again. He sat up straight, unhooking his feet from around the table legs to pull his jeans up again. "Okay, I better head out now. See you soon, yeah?"

Jackson stood back to allow him space to pass, smiling. He seemed sincere as he nodded. "See you soon."

Chase's hands shook as he pulled the workshop door shut behind himself. He walked down the dirt driveway to the sidewalk and shoved them into his pockets.

*What have I done?*

That familiar pit of self-loathing was gone. This time... he felt good, and he wasn't sure how to handle it.

## Jackson

By Friday, two days later, Jackson was still thinking about Chase. That gorgeous, intense, sweet man who'd writhed in pleasure on his workshop table wouldn't get out of his mind.

He'd told himself he was looking for a boyfriend, not a hookup, but that...

That had been *good*.

He didn't try to fool himself into thinking it would be that good with some other random guy, though. It never had been before.

No. This was about Chase. Somehow, Jackson was already crushing on Chase a lot harder than he'd thought... and it was mutual! Why hadn't he picked up on it before?

He'd been excited when the cool, out-of-town artist had agreed to meet up with him for the first time for coffee. And when they'd agreed to make it a regular thing. And each time he'd spotted Chase waiting for him at the coffee shop table.

After flirting at the art show, Jackson had just backed off because... well... he didn't have a good reason, really. He'd just focused on work instead, and renovations, and everything but dating.

Had Chase been harboring the same quiet flame all along? Maybe that was projecting his own feelings. Chase might not even want more than a one-time hookup.

That actually worried Jackson. Chase was acting weird. He hadn't texted Jackson in the last few days, and he'd definitely run away after their hookup. Jackson had let him go. Chase's emotions might play havoc with him if he had some kind of awful ex stuff going on, after all. Now he wondered if he should have asked Chase to stay and talk it out.

But man, if he could hand over the perfect finished sword and win Chase's heart... He allowed himself a romantic daydream or two as he threw everything into finishing those railings for Cam's house.

That weekend, Cameron was out at Noah's being lovey-dovey, which

was perfect timing. With Thomas's help, he used his spare key to get into Cameron's house and haul the last few pieces inside. They were spending Saturday afternoon installing them.

Thomas seemed to enjoy sawing through the old posts. They worked a section at a time to pull out the crappy old wooden railings and balusters. Then, they hauled up a section of the new wrought iron ones to install.

It was hard work. By the time they'd worked their way down to the last section along the stairs, Thomas was worn out. "I'm gonna grab a breather."

"Getting hot in here, isn't it? We need AC," Jackson laughed. "You go get fresh air."

Once Thomas was out, he went about testing the railings and measuring. He made sure everything was flawlessly installed while his mind wandered again to Chase.

Thomas came back in a minute later. "Someone here to see you," he told Jackson, his lips tugging up in a little smile.

"Oh?" Jackson wasn't expecting anyone. He knew who he *hoped* it was, but it probably wasn't. "We're done here once we clean up all the shavings and polish the railings..."

"We can do that tomorrow," Thomas laughed. "I'm done and you should be, too."

Jackson grinned and rose to his feet to head for the front door. "Yes, boss. Lock up?"

"Yep."

When Jackson headed down Cameron's driveway, he saw what Thomas meant.

Chase was hanging around his front door, kicking the step as he turned this way and that. Even from a distance, he looked nervous... but cute.

*Always cute.*

"Hey," Jackson greeted with a broad smile. "How are you doing?"

"Um, good," Chase answered. He didn't smile back yet, and stress lines had formed around his eyes. His hands were tucked into his pockets, his body swaying a little from side to side. "Can we talk for a bit?"

He was breathing heavily, his lips swollen and his eyes dark and fixed right on Jackson.

*Does he want to hook up again?* A moment of annoyance flashed through Jackson: it would be hard to say no, but he wouldn't agree to a string of booty calls. Even if it was Chase. Probably.

"Sure," he answered. He passed Chase to open his front door and let him in.

Chase followed him to the living room and dropped onto the couch next to him. Jackson had half-expected him to sit on his lap. "I'm sorry I ran out on you."

"Oh, no. It's all right," Jackson told him, but his curiosity was ignited. Chase was admitting to doing that? What was going on? "Can I ask... what that was about, though?"

"I was nervous," Chase admitted. He'd drawn his hands out of his pockets and he was fidgeting with his fingers in his lap. "*Am* nervous," he corrected himself.

Jackson raised his eyebrows, remaining calm so he didn't startle Chase. "Oh, yeah? Well, you don't have to be. We can play it cool if you want."

"That was the first time in ages a guy reciprocated. And I just... uh... Do you want a date?"

Jackson wasn't expecting that. *Is he interested, or is he just offering to be polite?* "If that's what you want, too, yeah. You don't owe me one." The look Chase gave him, his brows slightly furrowed and those cute lips parted slightly, made Jackson think nobody had said that.

"No," Chase agreed a few moments later. "I suppose I don't, but I... I like you."

Jackson's heart soared. He tried to hide his feelings, but he knew he was an open book. Everyone teased him for it. He was already smiling as he watched Chase. Following his instincts, Jackson leaned in. "Can I kiss you?"

"Oh, yeah." Chase shook out the nervous jitters with a quick laugh and leaned in to press his lips against Jackson's.

The kiss was short and sweet this time. Jackson took his time gently sliding and caressing his lips against Chase's. When they pulled back, their eyes fluttered open again as they stayed close to one another. Chase's arm brushed against Jackson's shoulder. The sparks that

ignited made Jackson want to hug him and slide closer.

Chase looked much calmer now, his shoulders down and his muscles loose again. "Cool."

"Very cool," Jackson agreed with a grin. "You're really cute. I didn't think you were into me..."

"I didn't think *you* were into *me*!" Chase rebutted, and Jackson laughed. "When did that happen?"

Jackson shrugged. "I thought you were cool from when we first met at the show."

"Three months later... you slow-played that one," Chase laughed. He pulled himself up to his feet. "I don't want to run, but I gotta get to work and then fencing... I just wanted to stop by and sort us out first."

Jackson stood up again, too, to walk Chase to the door. "I'm glad you did. What's your work schedule like?"

"All over the place, and fencing classes too... but I'm off on Monday night."

Jackson could be free any night he wanted, so he nodded. "That conveyor belt sushi place has Monday night specials..."

"Yes, please!" Chase exclaimed. "I've been dying to go out for sushi with someone. Floyd hates fish."

Jackson burst out laughing. "Oh. Well, I'm glad I can fill a sushi niche."

"You can fill..." Chase actually stopped and blushed, which made Jackson stare. He wouldn't have held back the comment before. Something was different. "Never mind."

Jackson swatted Chase's arm playfully. "Naughty. Get out of here. Don't be late for work."

Chase laughed again and leaned in and up to peck his lips. He nearly pulled the door open in his own face in his rush to get out the door. Jackson bit back a laugh, leaning in the doorway to watch him jog down the street, smiling all the way.

That broody, anxious air was gone, and Jackson was glad to see it go.

## Chase

“Oh, my God,” Chase mumbled to himself for about the dozenth time that day. All through his work shift, he'd been consumed by thoughts of the upcoming date on Monday. Floyd had eyed him when he came in to take the evening shift but he let Chase go without asking him why he was beaming.

Chase couldn't believe he'd pushed through his anxiety. He'd actually come back to Jackson and asked for a date.

Still, his anxiety was there. *I haven't been on a date in ages. What the hell am I doing?*

When he silenced that part of himself, the answer was clear: he was following his instincts. Jackson was worth a date. If only just to see how it went.

Once Chase got back to his apartment building, he let himself into the lobby. He fumbled around to find his key and check the mailbox. Probably just bills and junk, but he had to pay them sometime.

He closed his fingers around a small stack of envelopes and glossy fliers and pulled them out. He rifled through them before he even shut his mailbox again. Fucking post office guy kept bringing grocery flyers he didn't want.

Chase went stock-still when he flipped past the flyer to a plain white envelope. There was familiar handwriting: *C. MacLeod*.

“Oh, shit, no.”

*They found me.*

His hand shook as he closed and locked his mailbox. He yanked the lobby door open and jogged up the stairs to his apartment just one floor up.

*When did I last check it? Wednesday? Thursday?*

*Is this a warning?*

*Fuck, I should have been checking my mail daily, just in case. This was bound to happen...*

Chase headed straight for his dining room table, tossed the rest of his mail aside, and opened the letter.

It was a single sheet, not even a full page, handwritten, and a newspaper clipping was enclosed.

*Dear Charlie:*

*We've been thinking of you much lately and missing you. In a few months it will be the holidays. We hoped you'd have come around, but instead you have moved further away?? What is in New Brunswick for you? Your family is all here.*

*The congregation would welcome you back too. Fr. Williams has kindly agreed to help you find a better path. As you know, we are worried for your spiritual salvation. We have nothing against gay people; we just don't want our son to be one. We hate the sin but love the sinner. Your uncle has told you before how we feel but it bears repeating. Many people are doing good work in this field, see enclosed. You have the fortitude to become one of the lucky few to escape that path.*

*Luke misses you too. His grades include As in Math, Art, and Bible Studies. You know he would love to hear from you again. He drew you a Thanksgiving card at Sunday school and we were going to enclose it but he wants to give it to you in person. Buddy is getting older but still plays with tennis balls like always. Sometimes he lies on your bed and won't come eat until we pray with him. Your aunt and uncle moved to Colorado, and Grandma asked about you the other day. Your uncle said he wishes he could get through to you again. He misses his nephew. Sad that we didn't have news to share.*

*Please stop running and come to God. We're waiting to welcome you with open arms.*

*Your loving family,*

*Mom, Dad, Luke, & Buddy*

Chase wiped his eyes, throwing the letter on the table and drawing a deep breath as tears stung. This was the very fucking stereotype of what happened when a kid came out. Hilariously, hellishly, he was living it. Some people thought it was over these days, but obviously not.

He wished he could say he hated his parents for writing the letter, or for using his little brother and dog against him. For tracking him down when he'd moved to *another fucking province* and changed his name and left *everything* to escape their phone calls, visits, emails,

prayers...

But he didn't.

He just hated what they'd become.

Chase swallowed back his bitter words, stomping over to the coffee table to grab a pen. He leaned over the dining room table and, in huge letters, scrawled over the letter.

*I am a fag.*

His lip curled, he repeated the phrase over and over in smaller text. He wrote sideways across the letter to blot out everything they'd written.

*I am a fag. I am a fag. I am a fag...*

By the time he got to the bottom edge of the paper, his hand was cramping from holding the pen so tightly. The angry tears stinging at his eyes had given way to pure fury ripping through his bones.

How *dare* they try to guilt him? How dare they use his little brother, ten years old and already being indoctrinated by those bastards, against him? How dare they throw those words at him and now pretend to care about him?

First, they could answer for what they'd done. Then, *maybe* in another few years, he'd consider talking to them.

Chase's hands shook as he shoved the paper back into the envelope along with the clipping about some reparative therapy bullshit. He taped it shut, crossed out the address, and wrote his old home address on it. He had to search his junk drawer for a good minute before he found stamps. He slapped one on and strode down to the post box at the end of the street to drop it in. When the handle slammed shut, his letter swallowed by the system, he didn't regret it for a second.

For the first time since he'd read the letter, he took a long, deep breath. He let it out, pushing away from the post box again.

It was a warm summer evening. Maybe he'd eat out on his balcony.

---

As he pushed his empty bowl back across the flimsy plastic table, Chase licked the last few Sidekicks away from the insides of his cheeks. They were great for creamy, flat noodles, but they left an annoying feeling in his mouth.



He leaned back in his lawn chair, looking out over the lights of the apartment building across from them. He could see a small park and the parking lot. It wasn't the best view. Most people here didn't use their balconies except to store bikes.

Chase didn't care how bad the view was; he'd never had a balcony in an apartment before. Being able to step outside into fresh air, especially over the warm summer, was nice. Nothing like what Jackson and his brothers had going on, though... He was a little jealous.

He raised his thumb to his mouth to nibble at his nail absently, then jerked his hand away. He didn't want to get into that habit again. But of all the coping habits, at least nail biting wouldn't kill him.

Instead, he grabbed his phone and opened his string of texts with Jackson. The glow almost blinded him now that his eyes had adjusted to the darkness. He carefully typed out a new one.

*Still on for Monday?*

It was a hint as much as a question. Chase couldn't stand the thought of dragging Jackson into his shit. The thought of what could happen... And he didn't want anyone else looking at him with pity. Pity was one step away from disgust. Worse yet, one step away from 'what's wrong with you that they threw you out?' and the thoughts that crept into his mind after midnight.

It wasn't that late yet, and the answer was almost immediate.

*I'm on. Monday at 6pm? :)*

Chase worked his jaw around. His stomach churned with anxiety as he brought his bowl and fork back inside and locked his balcony door. Then, he sent a simple response.

*Sure :)*

At least Jackson seemed like a decent guy, and honest. He wasn't out to use Chase. Maybe Chase could find some way to make a relationship work. They could even just be friends-with-benefits, if Jackson wanted something stable.

Chase could do just sex. He knew he was good at *that*, and he would happily fall into bed with Jackson every fuckin' day of the week.

But sex aside, what did Jackson think Chase could give him? And was he right? Last week, Chase would have said he didn't want – couldn't do – romance. Now... he wasn't so sure.

Thomas

Thomas paused and squinted down the road, his hand on the little red flag on his mailbox.

That was a police car pulling away from the curb, and a flicker of movement on Cameron's porch caught his eye. Cam and Noah were standing outside, talking between themselves.

Thomas flicked down the red flag. He bundled the newspaper under his arm and crossed through the bushes to his brother's driveway. "Hey – what happened? Was that here?"

"Yeah," Cameron frowned. "At Jackson's. Someone complained about the smoke from his forge."

Thomas's eyes narrowed. "No. *Wood* smoke?"

"Apparently. The cop didn't take it too seriously," Noah murmured. Thomas liked him – he was grounded, sweet, and smart. A touch feminine, but they shared a certain appreciation for life outside the strict little box of masculinity. They had always got along well.

For once, Noah was in old, faded jeans and a t-shirt. That was rare.

"But who reported him?"

"A neighbor, apparently. I got to the cop before he got to Jackson, but Jackson's gonna be *pissed*."

Thomas's eyes were drawn back to his own house, then the house on the other side. "I bet I know who it was."

Cathy and Don, the couple on the other side, were standoffish. Several other neighbors had come to greet them, all amused or admiring their living situation, but they hadn't. They hadn't even waved when Thomas saw them on Friday morning before work. How rude.

"You think?"

"It's my best guess. Everyone else has been great. Occam's Razor."

Noah chuckled, but Cam rolled his eyes. "Don't talk smart people to me. All right, d'you think we should talk to them?"

“It might look a bit intimidating,” Thomas frowned.

Noah stifled his laugh and Thomas glanced at him. “Sorry. Just... the two of us a little less than him...”

Cameron folded his arms, his biceps flexing. He hadn't been able to train since he'd been diagnosed with CPVT. The doctors had promptly changed their order of “don't exercise hard” to “don't exercise at all until after surgery.” Even so, Cam still had more muscles than Thomas. Just like Jackson, his two brothers were built big and strong, and he'd been the runt since birth.

Thomas laughed. “Yeah, true.”

“How about a barbecue?” Noah suggested.

“A... what? We've been having them all summer,” Cam frowned.

Noah gestured around. “No, a community one. Hold one for the neighborhood. Once we finish pulling down all the fence, we'll have enough room. Make it an end-of-summer event, you know?”

“I like that idea.” Thomas could already see the potential – bribing their neighbors with food and handmade items. They could get to know Cathy and Don a little. Assuming they weren't homophobic assholes, they could cut off the problem at its root.

Nobody else had had a problem with the wood stove all summer. In a few months' time, everyone would be burning wood, too, as the days grew chillier. They just needed to make peace for now.

A smirk spread over Cam's face. “On that note, I could use a hand...”

Thomas eyed him. “With what?”

“Oh, god, you had to ask,” Noah laughed. “Go get work jeans on.”

Thomas blew out a sigh. He trotted down the steps and over to his house. As much as he didn't enjoy physical labor, he, Jackson, and Noah had all picked up some slack for Cam. Cam's heart condition was worse than the doctors had first suspected. None of them were letting him overwork himself, as frustrated as he was about it.

He joined the other two in the backyard a few minutes later, this time in old jeans and a t-shirt like Noah.

Cameron was hovering around near Noah, his hands rising. He looked like he wanted to help Noah lever the crowbar between the board and the fence.

“Go sit down,” Thomas ordered.

“Fine,” Cameron laughed. He sank into the lawn chair nearby and crossed his ankle over his knee, but still knelt forward to watch Noah work.

It was killing Cam not to be active. A shiver ran down Thomas's spine at the thought and he sharply reprimanded himself. That was hyperbole, but it might actually kill Cam *to be active*.

“What's going on? Work party? This early on a Sunday?” Jackson was already in work clothes as he stepped through the fence separating Thomas's house from his own. He walked through Thomas's yard toward the fence between Cam's and Thomas's places.

“Yep, come join us,” Thomas told him. “They put me to work, you can put those burly arms to use for once.”

Jackson laughed and smacked his shoulder. He took the pry bar out of his hand. “Let me do that part, string bean. And *I* did most of the sneaky railing installation.”

“I still can't believe you guys blindsided me with that,” Cameron marveled. “I walked in and nearly passed out.” At least he was joking about his condition now.

They all laughed, and Jackson pointed Thomas a few feet away. “You hammer out the nails. We're saving that wood.”

Thomas glanced over at Cameron and raised his eyebrows. *Should we tell him?*

Cam shook his head.

Jackson didn't even notice the exchange. He was buoyant, humming cheerily as he started prying boards out of the fence. One at a time, he handed them over to have the nails hammered out and be stacked up neatly. He ripped boards out easily when he had to. Thomas was privately glad he was taking over that bit.

“Someone had a good night,” Thomas observed with a smirk. He'd last seen Jackson going into his house with Chase, but Chase had left not long afterward. Was that what this was about? The way Jackson's eyes flickered to Cam and Noah before him told him he was exactly right.

“What, a man's not allowed to have good cheer in his own yard? Especially at a work party?” Jackson handed over a board and winked.

Thomas couldn't help a laugh. “Fine, be optimistic before noon. But

don't expect me to be.”

“It's eleven-thirty. You're running out of time,” Noah observed.

Thomas groaned. “Smart-ass.”

Noah smirked at Cameron, sharing some inside joke at that response.

They worked well together to pry out the rest of the boards along that side of the fence. They only snapped a few and saved a good chunk of them. When Jackson started carrying the lumber to his yard to store, Thomas pitched in. He wanted to help out just to get a chance to talk to him.

“You talked to Chase, huh?”

Jackson gave a rueful grin. “That obvious?”

Thomas coughed. “Uh, you're kind of beaming like the sun...”

“I'm never subtle,” Jackson lamented. “I got a date with Chase.”

Thomas's eyebrows shot up. He *hadn't* been imagining the chemistry between them at the barbecue! He pumped his fist. “I knew it.”

Jackson punched his shoulder lightly. “Fuck off. A gay guy can have male friends, you know...”

“Yeah, you have plenty. You don't sidle your way up to them like a teenage girl fluttering her eyelashes...” Thomas widened his eyes like Jackson's had been whenever he listened to Chase talk.

Jackson was bright red now, but he laughed. “You asshole. I thought you'd mock me less than Cam and Noah...”

“I'll be good,” Thomas promised, laughing. He raised his hands once he set down the load of lumber. “I promise. Keep me updated.”

“I will.” Despite his embarrassment, Jackson still glowed. He walked in a pleased, rolling stride, still humming under his breath.

It was good to see him like this. Thomas couldn't remember when Jackson had last been in love or even crushing hard. It was just like Cam had been around Noah in the spring. That left him as the only single brother.

*Not everything between us has to be a competition.* Thomas shook his head and followed Jackson back to his yard.

## Jackson

On Monday night, Jackson shut down his forge an hour early just to head inside, shower, and shave. Maybe half his appeal was working hard in the workshop, but this was a first date. He wanted to be clean and presentable.

Jackson shrugged on his usual gray t-shirt, then browsed his closet. He didn't want to choose plaid – too casual. A white shirt was too formal. Something in between...

After a few moments of thought, he picked out a long-sleeved dark purple collared shirt. He added a gray zip-up sweater in case the evening was chilly.

“That's it.”

Paired with black jeans, Jackson was good to go.

He strode out and locked the door to walk to the sushi restaurant. He could have driven, but it really wasn't far away and he was starting to like walking back and forth more to town. This neighborhood was only a couple minutes closer than his old house but it felt like a much bigger difference.

By the time he reached the sushi restaurant, it was six on the nose. Chase stood outside, browsing his phone.

“Hey! Did I keep you? Sorry!”

Chase automatically smiled, pocketing his phone and reaching out to touch Jackson's arm. “Hi. No, not at all. I just got here.” He leaned into Jackson and tilted his chin up, so Jackson leaned down to peck him on the lips. *He's so bold. I love it.*

“All right. Shall we head in?”

They took seats at a table next to the conveyor belt. Jackson rolled his shoulders and scooted in next to it to get a good look at what was going around. “How was your weekend?”

“Slow,” Chase admitted. “Work went pretty well, though.”

Jackson nodded. “Mine was pretty slow, too. I spent yesterday pulling

out the fence between my brothers' houses. The one between Thomas and me is the next to go."

Chase raised his eyebrow. "Just... ripping out fences bare-handed? Okay, Popeye."

Jackson was startled into a laugh. "I'm not casually boasting--"

The waiter interrupted them to deliver water and ask if they had any special orders. Jackson turned them down. It was more fun to hunt from the belt anyway.

"I wish they'd had cool stuff like this in university," Jackson lamented. "My buddies and I would have gone out all the time."

"You did uni here?"

"I did an associate's degree, yeah," Jackson told him. "Then I realized I was enjoying blacksmithing too much and I actually liked it. Why bother pursuing a useless degree and getting in debt for something I'll never use?"

Before he even finished the sentence, Chase was nodding hard. "Exactly. I did my freshman year at U of T in fine arts, and... Jesus, I blew so much money. Then I did a tattoo school and I got lucky enough to get an apprenticeship, and that actually gave me a career."

"D'you ever feel you missed out?" Jackson asked.

Chase frowned. "A little, sometimes. I mean, some guys wound up becoming socially aware, getting involved in activism and nonprofits and stuff. But a lot of others just... integrated into whatever other jobs we could find. I wish I'd been able to study queer studies as a major. I might've liked that."

"Yeah," Jackson hummed. He took his time to work through the three plates he'd first grabbed. "I don't know, I'm glad I went, but I'm also glad I didn't finish."

"What was the associate's degree in?"

"Metal processing."

Chase looked blank. He finished his last roll and started watching the belt again. "Like... what?"

"Uh, basically, I could be a welder or a ship-builder or something."

"Oh. So that tied in with your blacksmith stuff. That's a lot more useful than an arts degree..." Chase grabbed another plate from the

belt. "Aha. I knew there was another one of these going around."

Jackson laughed, then shrugged. "Even your year taught you some stuff for tattooing, though, I bet?"

"Yeah," Chase admitted. He smiled, setting down his chopsticks to drink a few sips of water. "I like that you take my art seriously."

Jackson stacked up his empty plates and folded his arms, leaning back to watch Chase. "Of course I do. I'm in the same boat. Most people think I just make swords..." Chase blushed. "Not you," he hurried to reassure Chase. "But most people."

Chase nodded. "Before I talked to you, I kinda thought so, too. I had this image of, I don't know, a manly burly dude with a foot-long beard and a Viking longship in his backyard..."

Jackson started to laugh. He might have been pretty strong, but he wasn't into the reenactment scene like his weaponry customers. "Yeah, no, that's common."

"Kinda like most people think tattoo artists are ultra-masculine bikers. I'm girly in that scene," Chase sighed.

Jackson frowned sympathetically. "Yeah. A little like Noah, then...?"

Chase winced. "I guess."

*There it is.* Jackson leaned forward. "Sorry. Is there something bad between you two...?"

"No, no," Chase hastened to answer, almost spilling his water glass. "Crap. Oh, I didn't spill it." He pushed aside his empty plates, then stacked them up to make room, his eyes down on the plates.

Jackson gave him a few moments to decide how to answer since something was clearly bothering him. He'd noticed something weird between them at the barbecue.

"I just... I have trouble with really... fem guys," Chase admitted. "Christ, that sounds bad, but it's just..."

"Internalized shit? We've all been there."

Chase winced again and nodded. "Yeah, I guess. I *like* Noah, it's just... you know, he'd never fly in my hometown."

*I thought he was from Toronto.*

Jackson sipped from his water glass. When Noah didn't seem inspired to continue, he answered, "Fair enough. As long as you treat him fine



and vice versa, we're cool. It takes time to work out all that BS from your system."

"Oh, yeah. Of course! I'd never take out my own... issues... on him," Chase promised. He met Jackson's eyes now with a frown of concern. "Sorry I'm being weird. It was just a rough weekend."

*I'm not guiltin' him, am I?* Jackson reached across the table to touch Chase's hand. "I know you wouldn't." Chase hesitantly smiled, and Jackson met it with a smile of his own. "Sorry you had a bad weekend, man."

"S'okay," Chase assured him. "It's a lot better Monday night, though." Chase didn't pull back from the touch, his gaze flickering between Jackson's eyes. He turned his palm over to rub his hand along Jackson's as they shared a few moments of silence. "Shall we continue eating? Or are you full off three rolls?"

"Hell, no, I'm not done," Jackson laughed. They turned their attention to grabbing plates from the belt again. Jackson started smiling again when he realized his hand still tingled from the brushes against Chase's palm.

---

The rest of their supper was far more relaxed. By the time he walked Chase home, they were bumping each other's sides playfully. Chase even reached out to take his hand for a few minutes while they walked and bantered.

Chase's weird moment earlier was truly gone, his wicked sense of humor back. Sometimes Jackson was left speechless, but he always ended up laughing. It was self-deprecating sometimes; Chase didn't take himself too seriously, and Jackson liked a grounded guy.

"You could come in," Chase offered, gesturing toward his apartment building. "I'd like that."

Jackson's eyes flickered between Chase's. Even the prospect of pulling away from him and walking home right now felt... cold.

Even in the short second or two he thought about it, the burn under his skin told him he wanted Chase.

"Okay."

They were quiet now, the banter of moments ago gone as Chase led him to the staircase and up the flight of stairs. Every time they

brushed, Jackson heard Chase's breath catch. He was sensitive even to Jackson reaching out to run a hand slowly up from the small of his back to the back of his neck.

*He could be really fun in bed.*

Jackson played with the hair at the back of Chase's head while Chase unlocked the door.

They took seconds to take their shoes off, their eyes fixed on each other.

"Want some water or something?" Chase asked to break the tension, his breathing already quick and his pupils blown wide. His eyes kept flickering up and down Jackson's body.

Jackson shook his head. He'd had his fill at the restaurant. He wanted a drink of *this* man, though.

"C'mon, then." Chase took his hand to lead him to the living room and plopped on the couch, then pulled Jackson down beside him. He casually yanked his shirt out by the front so it was untucked and unbuttoned the top button or two.

Jackson shifted to sit sideways, his arm along the back of the couch behind Chase. "You're really trying to tempt me, aren't you?" he teased.

Chase gave him a sly wink. "I might be. I've been waiting for hours now, you wanna kiss me again or what?"

*Cocky!* The demand made Jackson laugh out loud, a grin spreading over his face. "I suppose. If you insist."

He leaned in to press his lips against Chase's warm, pliable lips. Chase turned to press their knees together, already sliding his arm around Jackson's shoulders.

Jackson slid his arm around Chase's back in response, running his hand up Chase's back to the back of his neck again. He kissed Chase's lips a few times for thoroughness. Next, he started to kiss along his jaw to his ear.

A shiver wracked Chase, and Jackson grinned. "You're so much fun," he murmured into Chase's ear. He gently pressed a few kisses below and behind Chase's ear.

"O-Oh Jesus," Chase whispered, his nails digging into Jackson's shoulders.

He was so fucking sensitive, and Jackson loved it. He kept kissing along the rim of Chase's ear to his lobe. He flicked his tongue along it and Chase's body nearly melted in his arms. At the warm kiss to his pulse point on his neck, Chase shifted, his breath catching.

It only took a kiss or two at his collarbone before Chase fumbled to unbutton the rest of his shirt, shoving it wide open.

Jackson took a moment to admire his chest, nearly bare of tattoos around his pecs. It showed off a gorgeous piece: an old-fashioned clock with Roman numerals and some fluid lines around it. "Beautiful tattoo."

"Th-Thanks," Chase breathed out. His voice was hoarse already, his body arching toward Jackson. Jackson gently trailed his lips along the warm skin of Chase's collarbone.

Chase was already panting, tiny sounds escaping from the back of his throat. His body pulsed and shivered with pleasure as Jackson gently savored the warm, soft skin under his lips. Jackson's lips closed around his nipple just below the tattoo, and Chase gritted his teeth and just moaned.

Jackson flicked his tongue along the nub, then circled his tongue around it a few times before flicking it a bit harder.

"Jesus, Jackson," Chase whimpered, his nails biting *hard* into Jackson's shoulder now. It was a good thing Jackson had his shirt on.

He was so a scratcher... and maybe a screamer.

Jackson itched to find out.

He just chuckled and kissed over to the other one. He took his time to lick the bare skin around it before he licked the nipple and flicked it against his teeth.

Chase was sliding closer to him, pulling himself across the couch in an attempt to straddle Jackson's lap.

Jackson pulled back, his breathing heavy. "I don't want to leave you hanging. We should leave off before I get too far."

Chase groaned quietly. He touched his face to compose himself. "Yeah," he agreed breathily. "You're fuckin' addictive."

He was utterly, breathtakingly gorgeous, and Jackson was *hooked*.

"So are you. When you're not running," Jackson winked.

"I won't run next time," Chase mumbled, but he was blushing hard as he lowered his hands again. He turned his head so Jackson kissed his lips instead of his cheeks. "You're incredible."

Jackson chuckled, tangling a hand in Chase's hair and cupping his cheek.

God, it fit perfectly in his palm. He gently rubbed his fingertips through the hair above Chase's ear. He rubbed his thumb along Chase's jaw, watching his expressions with such affection. He pecked Chase's lips again and sat up to let him compose himself.

Chase murmured, "It's my turn, though. I owe you one..."

Jackson frowned. *Nope*. "No such thing as owing me," he told him firmly. "I don't want you counting favors."

Chase blushed again, his cheeks rounding in pleasure before he smiled. "C-Cool. You don't want to...?"

Jackson shook his head. "Not tonight," he murmured. "Another date? If you're up for it. You don't have to go on a date every time we make out. I mean, we're not exclusive. It can be a forging date."

Startled, Chase laughed. "No, I got that," he assured Jackson. "And no, we're not. But I... I think I'm cool with a forging date. That sounds hot. Haha."

Jackson snorted with laughter at the little pun. He reached out to cup Chase's cheek again, then rose to his feet. "All right. Tomorrow? Is that too soon?"

Chase laughed again. "Tomorrow's great," he murmured. The way his cheeks shone made Jackson suddenly realize what Thomas meant about him glowing.

*Ohhh. The feeling's mutual.*

Maybe Chase couldn't say it yet, but Jackson wasn't the only one wanting touch and affection just as much as sex – maybe more. Chase stood up to walk him to the door, and he took his hand. He rubbed his thumb down Jackson's, fidgeting with his fingers.

Chase didn't even seem to want to let go of his hand when they reached the door.

Jackson laughed gently. "You had a good time tonight?"

"Really good," Chase told him with another of those wholehearted smiles, finally letting go of his hand so he could pull on his shoes.

“You?”

“I did.” Jackson bent over to shove his shoes on again, then straightened up.

Chase looked adorable standing there all mussed up. His hair was a mess, his eyes hazy and cheeks still pink with pleasure, a smile on his lips...

He was so irresistible.

Jackson slid his hands around Chase's hips and pulled him in to kiss him once more. “Okay. I don't really wanna go, but I should...” he laughed.

Chase was still grinning. “Me neither.” He hesitated and added, “Been a while since I had a date this good.”

“Me too.”

Jackson brushed a hand over his face and shook his head. *Okay, snap out of it. God. It's like you're sixteen again.* He cleared his throat and pulled back from Chase, raising a hand to wave. “Tomorrow, yeah?”

“Definitely tomorrow,” Chase confirmed, reaching out to hold the door for him.

Jackson waved once more before pulling open the staircase door to head back to his own house. For the first time in a while, he could see himself not just having sex after a date, but spending the evening afterward with this guy. He could see himself just holding him, playing with his hair, teasing him...

He was lost in Chase.

## Chase

The first hour after Jackson left was the best. Chase tidied up his apartment and grinned at thoughts of their upcoming date tomorrow. He'd skip a fencing session for Jackson. After that point, as darkness fell over the city and the quiet of his apartment sank in, his mood started to sink.

It wasn't the same strange, stomach-grinding numbness as before. It was the growing feeling that something wasn't quite right. The more Chase tried to ignore it, the worse it got.

"Christ," he finally muttered as he grabbed a beer bottle and turned on the TV to try to find a distraction.

It wasn't fair. Jackson always worked to pleasure him and make him feel utterly comfortable and secure. They hadn't even hooked up, for Christ's sake, and he was still left feeling like this.

What was up with that?

A beer later, he thought he had it untangled: *something* fucked him up about feeling desirable. He'd thought that was one of the things he most wanted. But he used his good looks in order to give pleasure to other guys. Letting them do whatever they wanted felt good – in the short term, at least.

Being pleased? That was harder. If he wasn't giving Jackson pleasure, what was he giving him? Was this pity? Was he being used somehow? Was he expected to romance him, to be his Noah now that he'd seen Cam happy settling down with Noah? *Could* he be that kind of guy for Jackson?

He didn't want to think about the implications of this realization, but it stayed on his mind. TV just wasn't enough to get his mind off it.

Chase made himself wait one more beer before headed to the gay bar.

---

Chase wasn't ashamed of going home with Antonio when they ran into each other again. The guy had been good enough last time. Under the

heat of the dance floor, Antonio whispered filthy things about getting *him* off this time, too.

The thought both scared and pleased Chase. He kind of liked being made to shut up and feel good for ten seconds before his anxieties kicked back in again. More importantly, he wanted to get fucked, and Antonio would give him that much.

Antonio's car was parked in a different lot this time, behind a commercial building. It was a bit of a shorter walk and more private anyway.

This time, Chase rolled over onto his front when he slid into the backseat.

The weight of Antonio blanketed him. He let out a breath, wishing Antonio were just a little heavier and stronger... more muscled, like Jackson--

*Oh, fuck. Don't think about him every time you hook up from now on...*

Chase tried to focus on the here and now: the man who was grinding against his ass. His hard cock throbbed between them as he mouthed at the back of Chase's neck.

Something didn't feel right, but he quashed his gut instinct. His gut instinct had led him far fucking astray before, after all. The only way he'd know whether his intuition was right or not was to test it, and he was going to do that. Antonio probably didn't care why he got to fuck Chase again.

Antonio reached under him, squeezing his cock and rubbing sensually. He ran his other hand up across Chase's stomach.

Chase moaned, pressing his forehead hard into the seat. Antonio's hands wandered south to unfasten his jeans and slide them down. Again, Chase fingered himself briefly. Then, Antonio unzipped his own pants and a condom packet crackled in the silence of the car.

Antonio's cock pressed against his opening. Chase breathed out, curling his fingers into the seat. At least his partner took it slowly and let the lubricant from the condom ease him inside instead of pushing it.

"You are all right?"

"I'm good," Chase answered breathily, his thighs shaking. "Thanks."

As Antonio slid into him, Chase pressed his forehead down and arched his hips more. He was going to have reddened grid lines from the seat

across his forehead after this, but he didn't care.

"You are hot again," Antonio observed. "I'm glad you came back."

Chase moaned in response. Honestly, he couldn't say the same. He hadn't been looking for Antonio until they bumped into each other while dancing.

Antonio fucked him slower this time for the first couple of minutes. The car bounced with the force of Antonio's thrusts. The Italian student grunted as he pounded into Chase. Chase's cock throbbed with need under him. Chase slid his hand under himself to jerk himself off fast and hard.

The air was hot in here. The night absolutely silent besides the rough slaps of skin on skin, the grunts and moans, and the roughness of their breathing.

"Let me please you."

Chase let go of his cock and grabbed the seat instead, breathing out a quiet, "Hah! Ahh..." when that firm hand wrapped around him and started to jerk him off.

The rough, tight ring of fingers sliding down his shaft alternated with sharp thrusts into him and across the sensitive prostate...

Chase lost himself in the moment until his body started to tighten with involuntary pleasure. "Yes...!" He heaved himself up to slide his arm under himself again and try to keep his hand over the tip of his cock.

"Come," Antonio breathed out huskily, emphasizing it with a sharper thrust of his hips.

The throb through his prostate made his cock stiffen further. His body was tense, his stomach pulled tight, his thighs quivered... And then, he spilled over the edge fast and hard. It was blindingly hard, but over quickly.

When the momentary blissful black faded, Chase's chest heaved. He'd squeezed Antonio hard, clenching and milking him. All the while, Antonio kept fucking however and whenever he could.

Antonio was coming, too, with unmistakable shuddery thrusts and grunts.

When Antonio's hips slowed and he pulled his cock out, Chase lay still. He let him scoot back out of the car first again.

Chase yanked up his jeans and rolled onto his back. He sat up to scoot



out of the car.

Antonio leaned against the door, giving him a hand up by gripping his bicep and pulling him upright. He let go as soon as Chase was on his feet. "You going home?"

Chase dusted himself off and stepped back. "Yeah."

"I could drive you."

Chase shook his head. "I like to walk." When Antonio leaned in to kiss his cheeks again, he turned his face away and clapped Antonio's shoulder again.

As he strode out of the parking lot, he heard Antonio's car start up and pull away in the opposite direction.

The sex hadn't been *bad*.

It had just been... nothing. Flat. Dull. Disappointing? Maybe a little.

His phone went off, and he pulled it out to idly glance at it, then swallowed hard.

*Had a great time today. Off to bed but thinking of you. xx*

For the first time in hours, his heart leapt into his throat with excitement. Even dancing hadn't thrilled him, but one lousy text felt like a double espresso in his veins. He reread it a few times, trying to come up with a reply that was sufficiently flirty, yet casual.

It had been months since Chase had felt that giddiness and his fingers tingled with excitement...

*Me too. Sleep tight. Can't wait for tomorrow ;)*

He stopped dead in the middle of the sidewalk as his fingers hovered over the "send" button.

"Oh, fuck. I really like him."

This meant the end of his hookups. It was pointless trying to fill the hole – in any sense of the word – with someone else when there was *one* guy he wanted. He wasn't stupid enough to keep trying anyway. One fuck with Antonio had been enough to tell him that much.

Chase pressed "send" and pocketed his phone for the walk home.

## Jackson

“So then, the guy decided he didn't really *want* a dragon tattoo anyway, and he told me he'd come back later. Floyd said he comes in about once a month to look at getting something but he never actually does.”

Jackson's eyes and focus were on the billet he was forging into the sword. From tang to tip, it took a tremendous amount of work to keep the blade straight yet flexible, strong yet beautiful. Knowing Chase wasn't going to use it for actual fighting, he could have just joined a few pieces of metal.

But Chase deserved something beautiful through and through, not just skin-deep.

“When he called in this morning, I told him he's got to put a deposit down before I sketch anything. Well, he didn't like that. When he threatened to go to another shop, I told him he could if he wanted. But I've got a lot more experience, and he'll get what he pays for.”

“Jesus. Damn straight,” Jackson agreed, letting out a breath as he carried the billet back to the fire. His t-shirt sleeves were pushed up to bare his shoulders. He'd left the door to the workshop open to try to vent a little of the hot air in here. Even though it was evening, they were having a heat wave – perhaps the last one of the season – and it was at least thirty degrees inside, like a hot Canadian summer day.

It was going to take so long to finish the sword. It took a long time to forge the blade itself, and there was the detail he wanted to put into the hilt and grip, the tempering process... but Chase was also planning an elaborate piece for him.

And having Chase's company in the workshop was wonderful. Chase wouldn't stop talking, which was fine by Jackson. He liked the background noise of his work, but human company was so much better.

“So I'll keep you updated if he calls back tomorrow,” Chase concluded with a laugh. He fidgeted with his sleeves as he sat on the workbench next to Jackson. He was much less afraid of the sparks and noise now;

he even handed over tools now and then. And he didn't seem to mind the heat at all.

"This sounds very dramatic," Jackson teased.

"It's about as dramatic as it gets. Except when parents come in to get their kids tattooed and yell at us about how we should let them..."

Jackson's eyebrows shot up. "Oh. Wow."

"I've dealt with a bunch of those before. Luckily Floyd has a no-under-18s policy across the whole shop. Another one I was freelancing from let individual artists decide, and that was a fuckin' mess."

Jackson clamped his tongs around the blade and started to hammer out another few inches of blade. Molding the glowing, white-hot metal into something new would never, ever get old for him. Making weapons out of it was just *cool*.

Once he was done that series of blows, Jackson breathed out and went to dunk it in a barrel of water and cool it off.

"Did you decide what you're thinking for the grip yet?"

"I like the first design you showed me."

Jackson grinned. He prided himself on getting a quick sense of each client's style and aesthetic preferences. He'd called Chase's perfectly. It was easy to see what he liked from his tattoo style anyway. "Great."

"Sooo, you said you were cool with a tattoo design up to three inches, right?"

"Mmhmm?" Jackson suspected he knew where this was going.

"Well... have you thought about anything bigger?"

Jackson grinned. "Now and then. You wanna do a full sleeve or something?"

"Not if you don't want it," Chase laughed. "But, you know, a little bigger would look just fine on you. You're tall and broad enough. All that canvas..."

Jackson snorted with laughter. He carried the blade to the table to set down before he crashed on the bench next to Chase. He leaned back, stretching out his arms. "That just sounds kinda creepy. All this bare skin being a canvas."

"You know what I mean," Chase laughed. "Now you're the one making morbid jokes."

Jackson shrugged and leaned in to kiss Chase's cheek. "It's rubbing off on me. How you doing?"

Just as he'd thought, Chase hesitated to answer. "Oh... You know."

"You seem pretty worked up. Not that I mind you talking a lot, but..." Jackson trailed off. He turned to face Chase properly. Chase was in light jeans and a t-shirt again. Brave man, not to be wearing shorts in this heat. "You're not gonna faint, are you?"

Chase broke up laughing. "No. No," he repeated, reaching out to take Jackson's hand. He ran his hand up Jackson's bare arm to rub his back. Chase scooted a little closer on the bench. "I'm fine in here. Just a lot of stuff on my mind."

"Like what?"

"How much I wanna kiss you when you're swinging that hammer and sparks are flying and the forge is roaring..." Chase leaned in and up. By the last word, his lips pressed against Jackson's.

Jackson wrapped his arm around Chase's shoulders to pull him in for a good, sloppy kiss, their lips open. Chase's hand running up from his knee to his hip was *very* distracting as Jackson pressed into the kiss with a moan.

Jesus, Chase got to him fast. His cock was already hardening as Chase's hand caressed his hip and outer thigh. It wandered across to the top of his thigh as Chase sucked Jackson's lower lip between his own.

Jackson *wanted* Chase. It was so easy to want him. The way Chase moved, spoke, watched, flirted... and most of all, kissed...

He pulled back from the kiss, his chest heaving for breath. It was so fucking hot in here that *he* might just faint, especially if they were going to have sex.

"Wanna go inside?"

"Oh, God, yes," Chase admitted.

Jackson laughed. "Let me just cool off the forge. It'll be a few minutes."

Chase's voice was low and suggestive, sending a shiver straight down Jackson's spine. "I can think of *plenty* of ways to fill a few minutes."

It was so hard to pull away from Chase's arm around his back and Chase's hand rubbing his knee. Jackson hauled himself to his feet.

Chase stood up, too, lingering by the work bench while Jackson raked out the coals and watered them down.

He *could* head straight inside, but he made a policy of never, ever leaving without checking that the coals were cool. Embers could burn for hours, spark up again, and start a fire.

Christ, the fire under his skin was almost impossible to bear.

"I'm just *waiting* to be kissed over here," Chase murmured.

When Jackson glanced back at him, Chase was sitting on the worktable, his knees apart. He kicked his feet in the air and braced his hands behind himself.

"You're so fucking gorgeous." Jackson shook his head. He set down his water pail and strode toward Chase.

Chase was already flushed from the heat and it was impossible to tell if he was blushing, but he smiled and winked. "So are you, Hottie McBlacksmith, handling your rods..."

He spent a moment trying to fight the urge to say it. He lost the battle. "That was actually a billet."

Chase pouted, his long eyelashes fluttering closed for a second as he rolled his head back in a quiet lament. "Not the moment."

Jackson sidled up between Chase's knees. He braced his hands on either side of Chase and leaned in to press his lips to Chase's now-exposed throat. Chase's Adam's apple bobbed as he murmured against bare skin, "Sorry... not sorry."

Chase murmured, "You got anything else you wanna teach me?"

"I'm sure I'll think of something." Jackson had so many ideas, and none of them were appropriate for his workspace.

Chase squeezed Jackson's hips between his knees and flung his arms around his neck. He leaned up for a few more slow, lazy kisses to fill the minutes while the coals burnt out.

Taking it slow didn't mean there wasn't chemistry crackling to life. It blazed through Jackson's chest and warmed his fingers. His toes curled into his work boots and his heart pounded with pure need...

Jackson pulled back and whispered, "It's been long enough." Chase let go of him and he stepped away. He offered him a hand to help him slide off the table and onto his feet again.

They walked hand-in-hand out of the workshop as Jackson locked it up behind him. He led him through the grass toward the back door.

Once they were inside with their shoes off, Jackson stopped in the kitchen. They needed water after all that heat.

Chase leaned on the counter. That little frown line was back between Chase's eyebrows. His gaze kept flickering around the living room.

Jackson had to ask. "What's on your mind?"

Chase gulped down the rest of his glass of water, slid it back, and looked evenly at Jackson. "Are you saving it 'til marriage?"

The solemn question made Jackson burst out laughing. "Wait – no. What? No..."

Chase cracked a little smile of relief now. "I just... we've messed around but we haven't fucked, you know?"

"Blowjobs still count as sex," Jackson idly pointed out, but he saw what Chase meant. He put their glasses in the sink and came around the counter to lean next to Chase. Their gazes were locked.

Chase reached out to press a hand against Jackson's chest. He ran his hand up to his shoulder and fidgeted with a bit of his hair. "So what's holding you back?"

"Nothing," Jackson honestly admitted. "I feel like we're clicking really well--"

"You think?" Chase grinned.

"I just didn't want you to think I only wanted sex. You're worth more than that."

Chase paused. He started to smile. "Yeah?"

*He's precious.* Jackson leaned in to kiss him once, then murmured, "Yeah."

"Thank you. Take me to bed?" Chase's voice was soft and hopeful. He was watching Jackson like he couldn't believe his luck.

Jackson felt exactly the same. He took Chase's hand to lead him through the kitchen and living room and up the stairs. Every few steps, they paused to kiss each other. They chuckled, then laughed against each other's lips. It was somehow funny even though there was nothing to really laugh at.

They reached Jackson's bedroom door. Chase grabbed Jackson's hand

to hold him back for a moment. Jackson tilted his head curiously.

Chase murmured, "I've already said I like you... but I really do."

Jackson swallowed hard as his heart soared. Chase was sweet, wickedly funny, clever, and right now, his heart was bared.

He turned toward Chase and reached out to tip his chin up with his thumb. He pressed a kiss against the man's lips.

"I really like you, too," he assured Chase.

Chase grinned and grabbed Jackson's hand to pull him into the bedroom.

Jackson flicked on the bedside lamp with the wall switch, and Chase was already kissing him hard. His hands closed around Chase's slender waist to pull him in. He kissed him right back, running his hand up along Chase's spine to the back of his neck.

Chase slid his leg between Jackson's so he could grind against his hip. His arms were around Jackson's neck again.

Jackson gently steered Chase backward toward the bed, kissing him for each step he took. By the time Chase flopped onto his back on the bed, Chase's eyes sparkled with laughter.

"What?" Jackson grinned.

"You're cheesy as fuck."

Jackson smirked. "I get the impression you *like* cheesy as fuck."

"Damn it." Chase sighed dramatically, unbuttoning his shirt. "I can't help it."

Jackson winked and leaned in to kiss Chase's neck and the hollow of his throat. With each button unfastened, he kissed a little further toward his soft belly. He mouthed at Chase's hipbone and flicked his tongue along the waistband. Then, he kissed back up over his stomach and chest.

"Oh, fuck, that's right. You're a tease."

Jackson snickered. He started to suck on Chase's skin. He found a spot that made Chase almost convulse with pleasure just below his ribcage. "I don't remember you complaining..." He sucked just a little higher. "...when you came in my mouth..." He pressed an open-mouthed kiss across Chase's nipple. "...whimpering and thrusting all the while..."

Chase turned red and mumbled something, his neck and ears flushing

with his blush. Holy crap, he was adorable.

Chase was already so fucking hard – the tent was easy to see pressing against his jeans. It was so tempting just to make him come undone yet again under his mouth. But Chase wanted more than a blowjob today, and so did Jackson.`

Jackson flicked his tongue a few more times across Chase's nipple, still kissing open-mouthed to warm his skin. In response, Chase's breath caught again. His body pressed up into Jackson's as he straddled Jackson's hip from below. His hips rotated in a slow, needy circle, his cock rubbing against Jackson's hip...

Jackson moved his kisses up to kiss around the tattoo. "It still has sensation there, right?"

"Yes," Chase snorted in momentary laughter. "There's no difference."

"I haven't even gotten one!" Jackson reminded Chase, laughing before pressing a few kisses to the muscle between his shoulder and neck. "Don't make fun of me."

"If you make fun of me for calling them rods and not... bouillon..."

It was Jackson's turn to choke back a laugh. "Billets."

"Billets... Anyway, shut up and get your shirt off."

Jackson laughed again as Chase's fingers curled around the hem and yanked the light fabric up over his head. Chase tossed his shirt aside, then reached down to fumble at their waists and unfasten jeans.

Jackson almost tore Chase's jeans open, yanking them down and off as he scooted down the bed. He helped Chase kick them off and pulled off his socks. Chase's half-hard cock sprang free, eagerly awaiting his attention.

First, Jackson knelt back on his heels to admire him.

Shit, he was even more gorgeous now that he could see all his tattoos. There were sleeves of elegant animals twining around his biceps and forearms and the clock tattoo above his heart, of course. But there were more. Just below his waistband were three feathered silhouettes of birds with roughly feathered and faded wings and tails. Along his legs, he had gorgeous stenciled geometric patterns. They faded into roses with thorns, much like his wrists, along his thighs.

There was still plenty of bare skin along his legs, chest, stomach, and shoulders, though. How much did he plan to fill in?



“Most of my portfolio is written on me.”

Jackson dragged his eyes away from the shades and colors of the tattoos crisscrossing Chase's skin. “I'd hire you,” Jackson teased. He knelt upright to slide his jeans down, too.

“I'd let you,” Chase countered. “Look at all that canvas! I keep saying you should do more with it.”

Jackson grinned as he tossed aside his own jeans and crawled back up over Chase to kiss him. “We'll see,” he murmured.

“Is that a maybe?”

“That's a we'll-see,” Jackson laughed. “Hold on.” He leaned over to grab a condom and lube.

“But I'm so kissable and I'm not being kissed, *again*.”

Jackson swooped back down to press his lips hard against Chase's. Their bare skin radiated and doubled the heat for each of them as their bodies nestled against each other's. As they kissed, their cocks slotted together between their stomachs. Jackson ground down against Chase hard to make the most of it.

Chase moaned into his mouth, his head rolling back as his eyes slid closed. Jackson kissed him two or three more times for good measure, gasping for breath between kisses. He fumbled to open the lube and get it across his fingers.

“You're gonna finger me?”

“Do you want me too?”

Chase nodded hard. His eyes were open again, fixed on Jackson with fascination. “I love it,” he whispered. “I'm pretty squirmy...”

“Let me discover that on my own,” Jackson chided with a wink. He slid his fingers between the cheeks to find the opening. His fingertips danced around it first in small swirls. Chase exhaled quickly and pulled his knees further apart and up.

Jackson turned his head and kissed Chase's knee as he slid two fingertips inside the opening. He took it good and slow at first.

“Hnnh,” Chase moaned quietly, his own nails digging into his shins. “Yes...”

Jackson let his fingers slide further into the warm tightness, pushing them up into him. As Chase gasped for breath, Jackson curled them to

lightly stroke along the little bump. His eyes were fixed on Chase's expressions.

Chase's face showed them all: discomfort for a few seconds, then relief, then pleasure and outright joy. "Ohhh, yes," Chase groaned.

"You *do* like that," Jackson smirked, fucking him good and slow with two fingers at first. Every time he pushed them up inside Chase and rubbed that bump with the pads of his fingers, Chase's body quivered. He tried to push harder into Jackson's fingers.

Chase's breathing was quick, his flushed lips parted as his cheeks burned with pleasure. "Yes," Chase whispered now and then. "More...! Christ, you can give me more..."

Every time he swore, especially invoking God or Christ or hell, he said them with a glint in his eye. It was like he wasn't just emptily repeating bad words. Chase seemed to *mean* every curse, which made his vocal reactions a thousand times hotter.

Chase's arousal, the way he spat his words like he dared Jackson to defy them, was the hottest thing. He wanted to encourage it.

Chase wanted more? Jackson would give him more.

He added a third finger, sliding it inside to rub firmly across the prostate. He went up and down, over and over, crooking his fingers just right until Chase's back arched and his thighs started to tremble.

"Jesus. Jackson, don't – don't make me come yet...!"

Jackson grinned. He jerked Chase's cock a few times in his other hand before reluctantly sliding his fingers free from Chase's body. "You *are* fuckin' squirmy. I love how vocal you are."

Chase peeked through his lashes, and Jackson leaned down to peck his lips again. Once the condom was on, he stroked himself for Chase's viewing pleasure.

"Smoking hot."

Jackson grinned, scooting close to blanket Chase with his weight. He rubbed the tip of his cock in the crack and around the opening. He was always willing to tease Chase just a little more.

"Please...!" Chase moaned, raising one leg to slide around Jackson's waist.

Jackson pushed into the warmth and tightness of Chase. He breathed out a moan of relief at the same moment Chase groaned. God, he'd

been imagining this for days – ever since he'd first kissed Chase.

“Oh, yes,” Chase murmured, and Jackson smiled. Their nipples brushed as Jackson's body slid back and forth across Chase's. He thrust slowly at first, keeping his weight braced on one forearm above Chase's head. When Chase started to push into him in a silent demand for more, he sped up his pace gradually.

One thrust at a time, Chase started to melt under him, his lips parting as his eyes grew hazy.

“I love the looks on your face,” Jackson whispered and kissed Chase. Chase tried to return the kiss, but Jackson wanted to overwhelm him with pleasure. He kept sneaking kisses at Chase's lips and little sucks of the tip of his tongue or one of his lips.

“Y-You're... fuck,” Chase moaned, a quick smile flickering across his face. He wrapped his arms around Jackson's back and clenched around him. “Christ, you're big. And good... and big.”

Who wouldn't like hearing that? Jackson grinned and mouthed at Chase's neck and over to his ear. “And you're *perfect*,” he whispered, then sucked on Chase's earlobe.

Chase whimpered and clenched around him. Ripples ran through the muscles of his thighs and stomach as his back arched.

“You're so sensitive...” Jackson added wonderingly. He flicked his tongue along the rim before pressing an open-mouthed kiss behind Chase's ear.

“You can leave hickeys if you want.”

“Yeah?” Jackson kissed under Chase's ear until he found a spot that made Chase's breath catch and his nails dig into Jackson's back.

He kissed hard and sucked against the skin, playing his tongue along the sensitive flesh. A full-throated groan of pleasure slipped from Chase's throat. “Yes...! Yes, baby, yes... oh, fuck...”

Jackson sucked firmly for a few moments more before kissing gently across that spot. “So grown-up,” he teased. “Showing up to work with hickeys...”

“Fuck off.”

Jackson smirked. “Not that I mind claiming you...”

It was getting almost painful to stay slow and deep. He needed to go harder – wanted to fuck Chase into the mattress until Chase was

crying out in constant, overwhelming pleasure...

Jackson pushed his hips against Chase's faster and harder now. His well-honed muscles flexed to drive his hardened dick straight into Chase's needy hole. Every thrust of his cock head across the throbbing prostate inside made Chase's body seize up and a quiet grunt escape from his throat.

Chase gasped and his nails dug hard into Jackson's back. "Like – like *that*! Oh, God, yes...!"

Jackson was so happy to deliver what Chase wanted. He grunted, then groaned as Chase pulled him down enough to breathlessly kiss his lips. Their bodies drove together, and Chase grunted again, then another time.

That was the hardest and deepest he could drive himself, and just about as fast as he dared to go. Chase was coming undone under the attention.

"Yes...! Please, oh, Jackson, fuck... yes, like that... yes...!"

Chase's thighs were spasming and quivering now. His stomach tensed and his expression tautened with that same pleasure. He couldn't kiss Jackson now, his mouth falling open as he gasped for breath. He was so fucking *beautiful* Jackson almost couldn't stand it.

"Come for me, Chase. I can feel every bone in your body wanting to," Jackson moaned into Chase's ear. He kissed along his jaw and neck again. He sucked on Chase's neck as he tweaked Chase's nipple.

"Yes!" Chase grunted, grinding his hard cock between their bodies with each hard thrust. "Yes... yes..." He could barely seem to breathe, and Jackson fucking loved having so much effect on him.

His body was tightening again, and Jackson felt like perhaps this was the final moment...

It was.

Chase clenched hard around him and arched clear off the bed. His cock, trapped between their bodies, squirted hard, fast jets of passion between their stomachs. Chase's head rolled back. "Yes...! Jackson!" he moaned one last time. He subsided into a series of grunts, whimpers, and precious, fucking *hot* moans. His body clenched and quivered and writhed against the sheets.

His tightness milked Jackson's throbbing cock until Jackson felt his own balls draw tight. That was all the warning he had.

“Christ!” Jackson gasped at how fast and hard it was about to hit him, then stifled his moan in Chase's neck. He buried his face in Chase's shoulder as his cock plunged deep within Chase. It pulsed its own stream of wet pleasure with each unconscious, relentless thrust of his hips.

“Oh, God, yes,” Chase gasped. “Come, Jackson. That's it, baby. Fuck, you're so good... so good...” His hands ran up and down Jackson's back. The extra stimulation overloaded Jackson's nerves in the most pleasurable ways.

“Ohhh,” Jackson groaned. He slowed and stopped thrusting once he felt the last few drops trickle out. His cock started to twitch and soften again. He pulled gently out of Chase but stayed blanketing him with his weight.

Chase turned his head to kiss Jackson a few times as Jackson tried to catch his breath.

His head spun. All he could still feel or hear or see was the beautiful, tattooed man writhing under him. Chase let him hear every single second of pleasure that had raced through him.

As if Jackson hadn't known already, this wasn't just a passing fancy. He had utterly fallen for Chase, and his heart clenched with worry about how Chase was going to react to his next suggestion.

He rolled onto his side and cuddled into Chase, not even bothering to take off the condom just yet. He was too interested in running his hand up along that smooth chest to caress Chase's cheek.

“Hi.” Chase cupped his cheek in return. Those eyes that had been hazy and distant were bright with pleasure and interest again.

Jackson smiled. Chase had such a beautiful little sense of humor. “Hi,” he answered.

“You're about ten times sexier than I imagined, and believe me... it was pretty hot in my shower already.”

Jackson burst out laughing now. “I... Thank you.”

“You're welcome.” Chase winked. “It'll be even hotter now, though.”

Jackson roughly pulled Chase against him to hug him, rolling onto his back so Chase lay against his chest. He didn't give a fuck that they needed to wash up sooner or later... this was more important.

Chase easily moved with him and flopped along him. He pressed his cheek into Jackson's shoulder and hugged around his shoulders as

much as he could. Jackson gently kissed him, and Chase lifted his head to return the kiss.

“You are *so goddamn beautiful*,” Jackson murmured. “Sorry, I know I keep saying it, but... I just wanna make sure you know.”

This time, instead of the flippant acceptance, Chase gazed into Jackson's eyes, and... were his eyes a little wetter than normal? *Oh, shit. No... wait. He's not crying. Phew.*

Chase blinked and shook his head, a fond smile on his lips. “Thank you. I don't usually hear that *after sex*.”

“Well, I mean it,” Jackson murmured. “Any man would be lucky to have you.”

There it was again: the nervousness, like a skittish animal in his arms. Chase didn't pull away or run, though. He just paused, then settled against Jackson. “I wanted to talk about that.”

“Mhmm?” Jackson carded his fingers through Chase's hair, waiting to see what he had to say.

Chase winced. “This probably isn't the moment,” he murmured, “but I wanted to tell you: I hooked up with some guy at a bar yesterday.”

*Ouch.* Jackson swallowed hard but tried to reserve his judgment instead of leaping to conclusions like he always did. If he had one fault, it was hotheadedness, and he wasn't going to let it fuck up a promising relationship.

They weren't exclusive. Therefore, no fault.

“Okay.”

Chase breathed out a sigh, relaxing when Jackson didn't snap at him. “It... it didn't go too well. I realized I can't... I don't *want* to... just hook up anymore. I don't want just any guy around.”

Was he saying what Jackson hoped...?

Jackson swallowed hard, resisting the urge to cross his fingers. “So?” he asked, letting Chase tell him instead of assuming.

“So I want to... to date you. Just you.”

*Oh my God.* Jackson grinned. He knew his face gave away his answer already, but he couldn't change *that* much of himself. Open book or not, Chase seemed to like that about him. “Really?”

Chase smiled sheepishly. “Yeah.”

“All it took was one douche? I hope he wasn't too much of a douche. I can go intimidate him.”

Chase laughed and shook his head. “I don't give a crap about him. It just helped me realize that I wanna try dating you. I haven't dated anyone in a while, so I might be really bad at being a boyfriend, but...”

“That's fine,” Jackson assured him. “I haven't, either. I don't think there's any rulebook.”

“Good. I'm bad at rules.”

Jackson smirked and kissed Chase. “Hi, then, boyfriend.”

He wished he could have photographed the look of joy that spread across Chase's face. “Hi.” Chase was clearly trying not to be too enthusiastic and it was utterly failing. It made Jackson laugh.

“Wha'?”

“Nothing,” Jackson chuckled, caressing Chase's cheek.

“I – I should head home for the night, though. I got work early tomorrow... and all week. And I should go to fencing, since I'm paying for classes, for some reason,” Chase laughed.

Jackson groaned. “Classes *and* more overtime?”

“Yeah,” Chase mumbled, sighing as he kissed Jackson once more. “But I can show off my hickey to everyone.”

Jackson smirked. “You can leave some for me, too, sometime.”

“I will,” Chase winked.

*He has to get up and go now*, Jackson reminded himself. Of course, the logical thing to do was kiss him so well that he'd forget he had to leave.

Chase's lips caressed his own as Chase's lashes flickered closed and their noses bumped. Though Jackson was cooling off now, the warmth of Chase's slight body against his own was a treat.

This was his favorite part, and it looked like Chase wasn't opposed to it, either.

Minutes later, their hands in each other's hair and lips still brushing gently, Chase groaned. “Okay, I *really* gotta go.”

Jackson snickered. “Fine,” he murmured and kissed Chase just once

more before letting go of him.

There was a companionable silence between them now. They cleaned up and dressed, still touching and kissing at every opportunity.

"I think you're trying to lure me into staying here," Chase finally accused him. He was beaming as he leaned into Jackson while they stood in the middle of the bedroom.

Jackson wrapped his arms around Chase's waist to sway lightly with him. He was lovely to hug. "Maybe."

"S'not gonna work this time. Maybe next time."

"Okay." Jackson kissed the back of Chase's neck and let go, then reached out to open the door for him. "I'll keep trying."

Chase's laughs were lighthearted now, his smile bright. He sauntered downstairs, followed by Jackson, to collect his shoes at the door.

Then, Chase reached out to grab Jackson's t-shirt and pull him in for one more good, slow kiss. "I'll see you soon, hm? After this week."

"God, that'll feel like forever," Jackson lamented. He hugged Chase close and kissed him back. "Whenever you're free."

"Soon as I *can* be free," Chase promised, his voice so sincere. "And Jackson?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for being so patient with me." Chase's gaze flickered between Jackson's eyes, some unguarded emotion on his face that Jackson couldn't place yet.

Jackson just wanted to pull him in for another rough hug. Whatever was on Chase's mind, he'd learn it someday and it would no doubt make him angry. Instead, for now, he ran his hand back through Chase's hair affectionately. "No problem. That's what boyfriends are for, huh?"

The moment he heard the word, Chase grinned again. "Yeah," he agreed. He leaned in for one more peck before he pulled open the door. "See you, Jackson."

"Bye." Jackson leaned in the door, watching Chase walk down the path to the sidewalk. He leaned his head against the edge of the open door, pleasure still thrumming through his body.

*I have a boyfriend. And not just any boyfriend... Chase.*



There were no words to describe the sense of rightness that had settled deep into his bones.

## Chase

"You have a *boyfriend* now? Shit, Chase. Why didn't you tell me?"

Chase sprayed glass cleaner on the cloth, ducking his head as he blushed. He glanced at Floyd as he wiped in circles along the cabinet. His boss was about to leave for the day and had asked about his plans tonight. He'd subtly dropped the hint that he had *plans*.

"You were away at the Maritime tattoo show, and we were busy today..."

"Aw, man, that's awesome. Who is it? Do I know him?"

"I dunno. Jackson Riley. He's a blacksmith."

"Yeah, I think I've heard the name... I don't know him though," Floyd shook his head. "You're growing up now."

"Growing up?"

"You know, it's not all about bars. Everyone's gotta settle down sooner or later, gay or straight."

Chase frowned. He didn't especially like the implications. *Yeah, I hook up a lot, but not because I'm gay...* He let it go, though. "Yeah."

Floyd winced. "And I just stacked all that overtime on you. Sorry."

"Hey, the paycheck's nice," Chase laughed. "But yeah, it's our first date since we got together. We've both been working overtime..."

Floyd shook his head as he patted down his pockets for his car keys. "Let me know how it goes, huh? I wanna meet this guy if you get serious."

"I will."

"Call me if you need anything." Floyd raised a hand and waved.

"I'll be fine."

Once he was alone in the shop, Chase put away the glass cleaner and pulled out his phone. He didn't make a habit of slacking off work – even when Floyd said it was okay – but he had some important tasks.

Like finding a new apartment.

Chase still didn't know how his family had found this address – or even figured out that he'd come to Fredericton. He'd only told a few friends back at home in Ontario where he was going. None of them would have leaked it.

As he scrolled through Kijiji on his phone, he opened a few places in new tabs to check them out. At least there was a lot on the market thanks to the students moving at the end of the summer.

He didn't even notice the door open until he heard it jingle and slipped his phone under the counter. “Hey...”

Oh, wow. This guy was gorgeous.

“Uh, hi. Can I help you?”

The stranger's soft brown eyes were already fixed on him as he strode up to the counter. He was perhaps in his mid-twenties or even early thirties, with dark stubble. “Hello. I'm Alex. You're Chase, aren't you?”

Chase was wary. This man already knew him. “I am.” His hand slipped to the baseball bat beneath the counter. “Why?”

“I'm here to... confess, I suppose.” The stranger's voice was soft, yet clear. He wore a troubled frown as he rested his hands on the counter, directly watching Chase. “I'm a private investigator here in Fredericton. Your parents hired me to look into your whereabouts.”

*They did what?* Chase's jaw dropped.

“I'm normally never allowed to break the rules like this and... betray my client's confidentiality...” Alex trailed off. “But this case was a little different. I couldn't just not tell you.”

“That you were spying on me?”

What was his life? Who the hell had spies sent after them except... mafia guys and, like, gang members?

“Yes, if you want to put it like that. I haven't been watching your every movement, if that helps. I know it doesn't.”

Chase was pale. He let go of the bat and gripped the counter. Hard. “It doesn't.”

“I gave them your home address before I knew what was going on. They... let a hint slip about why they needed it... and I ended our working relationship. They don't know your workplace or new name.”

“Are they coming for me?”

Alex winced, his gaze flickering up to the camera and back at Chase. Then, he squared his shoulders against the consequences of his answer. “Yes.”

“Wh-When? Who?”

“I don't know—”

“Fat lot of good you are, investigator.”

Alex sighed. He wasn't trying to argue this one. He knew he'd fucked up in whatever moral compass he had. “I suspect it will take a few more days to arrange a trip out here, especially if they're driving. They didn't say.”

“Are you here to help me go undercover or... what?” Chase snapped. “Just assuage your guilty conscience and feel better about yourself? Leave me to deal with it?” Chase's demands grew louder.

“I... I wish I'd known what I do now. When I asked their reasons, they lied, and I didn't question it. I'm truly sorry, for whatever that's worth.” Alex raised his hands and stepped back from the counter. “I'd suggest moving, though that's not always practical.”

“Already on it, genius.” Chase pulled his phone out from under the counter.

Alex sighed. He drew a card out of his pocket and slid it across the counter. “Look, if you need help, let me know anytime. I'm sorry for what's happened. I owe you a few.”

“In case *I* want to spy on people here,” Chase snorted. “Very helpful.”

Alex watched him for a few moments, and Chase *hated* the sympathy in his expression. It was all too familiar. When they found out, everyone just fucking felt sorry for him instead of doing anything helpful. “You can call me anytime. Good luck.”

As the door rattled shut behind him, Chase let out a slow breath and thumped his head on the counter. Much as he wanted to tear up the card, he didn't. He just slid it into his pocket for later.

Fuck. His parents knew where he lived, but at least no more than that.

Eventually, he straightened up again. He shouldn't have taken it all out on Alex, but finally, he'd met someone he could blame for his current situation. Moving was expensive and shitty and a hassle and now unavoidable.

Asshole.

"I haven't been watching your every movement," Chase muttered sarcastically. "Wonderful. At least they can't find me when I'm not home. Fuck."

Movement outside the shop window made him startle, his breath catching in his throat.

It was Jackson.

Chase enjoyed watching his boyfriend squint at the sign to make sure he had the right place before pulling open the tattoo shop door. "Hey, good-looking."

Jackson laughed as the door swung shut and he crossed the shop floor in a few strides. "Hello yourself, gorgeous."

"I still have half an hour left." Chase leaned over the counter for a kiss. "Are you cool hanging out here?"

"Yeah, of course. I came early to watch you work, if that's okay."

"It's not very interesting. I have one appointment to finish touching up a tattoo in a couple minutes." Chase checked his phone for the time. "Other than that, nothing booked."

Jackson smiled. "I'll just talk, then." He dragged a chair from the waiting area over to the counter. He plopped himself down on it, stretching out his legs. "How was your day?"

*I can't tell him about all this shit yet...* Chase glanced across the shop and nodded. "It was all right. It was a day."

"Been a long week."

"Yeah? Your staircases are all done?"

"Thank *God*," Jackson groaned emphatically. He rubbed his hands down his face, stretching out his cheeks. "Bleeergh."

Chase laughed, propping his chin on his fist and his elbow on the counter. "Yeah? At least all that's done. I told Floyd I've got a boyfriend now..."

"Yeah?" Jackson's switch from melancholy to excitement was instant. He straightened up and folded his hands in his lap in a clear effort to calm down. "Cool."

Seeing someone his size get excited about everything was so cute. Chase smirked. "Yeah, and he shouldn't give me as much overtime

now. That was the last show of the season anyway.”

The door rattled and swung open as his client entered. She needed a few more details in her flower watercolor tattoo, and Chase was excited to finish it off. “Hey, Kate. How's it goin'?”

“Great. You? Sorry, am I early or late?”

“I'm good. No, that's just my boyfriend,” Chase grinned. “He wanted to hang out and watch me work.”

“You wanna watch Chase finish my tattoo?” Kate offered, already turning to show off the work in progress splashed across her upper arm. It was just about done, except for some light outlines they'd both agreed the flower's center needed and a few more splashes of color to even it out.

Jackson's eyebrows raised. “Oh, you don't mind? Yeah, I'd love that. I've never seen one.”

“Man, by your fourth or fifth it'll get old,” Kate laughed.

Chase led them both to the back room he'd already set up. He pulled up a chair for Jackson, hummed, and slipped on gloves. “So, just like we agreed on?”

“Yeah,” Kate nodded. “I can't wait to see it.”

“Me neither. I think it'll come out great with just a bit more detail.” Chase had already set up his needle, so he connected the gun to the machine and tested it to make sure it vibrated. He was using a shader rather than a liner for softer lines. Then he'd have to switch to color to blend in the final colors around the edge of the tattoo.

As soon as her skin was wiped down, his gloves changed, and the light on, Chase's focus was absolute.

His foot on the pedal, his pinky balanced his hand steadily on her skin. The needle vibrated and thrummed through his hand...

He carefully wiped away excess ink as he went. He was even more focused than usual from nervousness at being watched.

It wasn't like he'd never been watched before. It happened all the time. Bosses, apprentices, teachers, customers' partners...

But Jackson was different.

Chase drew a breath as he lifted his foot from the pedal and pulled the needle away. He smoothed a layer of Vaseline across her skin. “Now

for the colors.”

“Oh, wow, that looks great already.” Kate knew to look past the reddened skin at the quality of the lines. Chase was thrilled with how smoothly they'd come out.

“Yeah, that's definitely what it needed.”

Jackson murmured, “Wow. I bet everyone asks, but doesn't it hurt? You're bleeding...”

“Only a bit,” Kate answered. “Somewhere fleshy, it's just a bit like getting pinched a lot. You sort of tune it out. My shoulder blade was the worst one – everything else was easy.”

“Everyone's different,” Chase added as he swapped machines. He showed her the color he'd already added. “Just like we said, yeah?”

“If you're sure it'll come out right.”

“I promise,” Chase chuckled. It didn't always look the same in the bottle as on skin, after all.

“All right, go for it.”

“You need a break first?”

“Nah, get 'er done.”

Jackson laughed and settled back again, and Chase leaned in to start coloring. This was much more fun. He enjoyed sketching and shading in black ink, but clients always appreciated color. The extra pinks shading the edges of the flowers would make them stand out. Making it look like a watercolor was a thrilling challenge.

“How 'bout... that?” he murmured a few minutes later.

Jackson murmured, “Dude, that was cool.”

Kate laughed at him, then turned to get a good look. “Ohhh, yeah. You were right. That was the right color.” She examined it carefully. “Yeah, that's perfect. I think that's just what it needed.”

“Great,” Chase concluded. He glanced at Jackson. “That was a really simple session. Usually there's more back-and-forth or Sharpies...”

Kate added, “Fighting over color choices...”

Chase laughed. “I was right, though, huh?” he teased, flicking her shoulder gently. “Okay, I'll get that cleaned up and covered and you're on your way.”

“Awesome. Thanks.”

As Chase bandaged the spot, he felt Jackson watching him with admiration. It was hard not to grin.



## Jackson

“Man, that was cool,” Jackson said for about the third time once Kate was out the door and it was back to the two of them. He had a vivid memory of Chase's hands so carefully working across bare skin. He was precise with the sharp instrument, millimeters at a time, to create permanent art.

Chase grinned. He acted embarrassed at the attention, but it was easy to tell he loved it. He checked his phone, then tossed it onto the counter and turned to the cash register. “You really liked watching that. Maybe you should get some yourself...”

Oh, he was incorrigible. Jackson just laughed. “Like I said, we're starting with one.”

“It can be a bigger one...” Chase winked. He pulled out the cash drawer. “Wanna lock the door?”

Jackson strode to the door, and while he was at it, he turned the sign to read *Closed*. While Chase brought the drawer to the office and cleaned up the room, Jackson waited by the counter.

He wasn't a snoop, but sometimes he couldn't help but notice things around him. His eyes were drawn down to the orange and beige of the Kijiji website on Chase's phone. It showed an apartment listing: one bedroom, one bathroom, close to downtown in Fredericton.

*He's apartment-hunting? He never mentioned.*

“You looking for a new place?” Jackson asked as soon as Chase emerged from the hall.

Chase almost froze on the spot. He gave a nervous smile and grabbed his phone to pocket it. “Yep.”

That was weird. “Your lease coming up?”

“Uh, maybe, I dunno,” Chase answered vaguely and patted his pockets down for his stuff. “Where we goin' for drinks?”

Jackson took the hint, as curious as he was about why he'd gotten that reaction. “C'mon, just in walking distance.” After Chase locked up,

Jackson took Chase's hand to walk down the street with him toward a bar. They could finally unwind and grab sandwiches, British-style chips, and a couple beers.

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Jackson pushed back the empty basket of chips and wiped his fingers on a napkin, then hummed. "You never said why you're moving."

As much as he hated intruding on people's privacy, it was still bugging him. Chase's reaction was so weird – guilt, like he'd just been caught in the act of something or another.

Chase licked his lower lip and glanced down at his beer, his brow furrowed.

"I'm gonna ask what's going on when you act weird, you know," Jackson told him. "If you don't want me to know, you can tell me to fuck off. I won't be offended, I promise. You don't *have* to share everything with me."

Chase's shoulders sank and he offered Jackson a smile. "Uh... I need to move apartments. Don't wanna, but have to."

"Your landlord doing something illegal? Or neighbors? There's ways to break your lease, but there's usually a fee..."

"Oh, I know." Chase sounded bitter. "Boy, do I know."

Jackson leaned in. "I can put you in touch with the lawyer who helped me get my shed rezoned. He does all kinds of property stuff, and he's cheap. Might save you money if your lease break fee is high enough..."

Chase snorted and gulped the rest of his beer down, pushing back his glass. "No lawyers. I'll deal with whatever I have to."

Jackson rubbed his chin. He reached out to touch Chase's arm. "Just... let me know if I can help, all right? We still don't know each other super-well, but I worry about you."

It was true: it was easy to worry about Chase, especially when he had so many odd habits that Jackson just hadn't placed yet. Nothing that was a deal-breaker... just odd.

"Thanks," Chase smiled and leaned in across the table to peck Jackson's lips. "C'mon, let's get home. Your place?"

"My place is good," Jackson agreed. They headed up to the bar, debit

cards in hand. Before Chase could pay, he took the bill, playfully shouldering in past him.

“Thanks,” Chase laughed from behind him. Chase touched the middle of his back as he waited next to him to leave.

They made polite conversation with the waiter. Jackson felt eyes on their back as they left the bar holding hands. He'd learned over the years there weren't as many people watching as it felt like, but it only took one asshole. Not that *that* would stop him. If he wanted to hold Chase's hand, fuck it, he would.

Besides, Chase's hand was warm in his, and Jackson was tingling at the looks Chase was starting to give him. They couldn't get home soon enough.

## Chase

Jackson's house had small piles of construction material in strange corners. It didn't look quite finished, but it felt... like home. Maybe because it smelled like Jackson and it had far more character than Chase's plain little apartment.

He and Jackson didn't even stop at the kitchen on the way up to Jackson's bedroom. Getting naked together was the best way to make up for their week apart.

As Jackson pulled off his jeans, Chase grabbed him from below to wrestle him onto the bed and on top of him.

Jackson laughed. "I missed you, too, babe," he murmured and leaned down to kiss Chase.

Chase arched into Jackson and rubbed their bodies together, grinding up against him. "Hnnh," he breathed out, his lashes fluttering closed to enjoy these kisses. "Lemme show you how much I missed you."

"You sure?" Jackson murmured, his eyes lighting up with amusement.

Chase let his gaze wander down from Jackson's eyes, across the curves and planes of his muscular chest. His stomach was tight, his biceps huge, his cock thick and half-hard already. It stood up in a stark reminder of what they both craved. Chase was rapidly getting hard against Jackson's thigh.

"Very."

He wanted to taste Jackson again. He was so fucking delicious, and Jackson responded so well when his thick cock was in Chase's mouth...

Chase grabbed Jackson's ass and slapped it to encourage him to scoot up over his chest.

"Nnh," Jackson grunted and grinned, brushing his hand back through Chase's hair. Then, he shifted himself up to kneel over Chase's chest. He gripped the headboard with one hand and his own cock with the other.

Chase licked his lips pointedly. He ran his tongue back and forth across his lower lip as that pink, soft flesh came to press against his lips. He licked it and closed his lips to suck around the tip.

"Hnnh," Jackson approved.

Chase flicked his hand to get him to let go of his own cock so Chase could grab it.

"Demanding," Jackson whispered but did so, grabbing the pillow above Chase's head instead. "Ooh, that's it, baby..."

Chase bobbed his head down to meet the side of his own fingers, rubbing the base all the while. A cock firming up in his mouth, flushing with blood and stiffening in response to his hot, wet mouth... That was one of Chase's favorite feelings.

The fact that it was Jackson's thick cock was even better.

Chase sucked his cheeks in and pulled his head up to the tip, then back down onto Jackson's cock. It was awkward going at this angle but he could breathe pretty well considering the size of the dick he was sucking.

"Lemme know when you want me to stop," Jackson murmured. "Or if you have to breathe."

"Mmhmm," Chase awkwardly mumbled around the length, his gaze flickering up Jackson's body. He couldn't even properly see Jackson's face right now.

Jackson's thighs quivered when Chase squeezed his ass again, which gave him an idea.

Chase brought one hand around to slip his own fingers into his mouth alongside Jackson's cock, getting them good and wet. He slid them down Jackson's lower back and between his cheeks to the opening.

"Oof! Bold," Jackson whispered, his thighs stiffening and body clenching for a moment. "Hnh..."

Jackson was hard now, that was for damn sure.

Chase circled the finger around Jackson's opening. He hesitated before pressing inside, his eyes flickering up to Jackson's. When he paused for a few seconds, Jackson leaned back to make eye contact. Jackson grinned and nodded.

As Chase sucked his head up to the top of the cock and bobbed it back down again, he slipped the tip of his finger inside the tightness. He

thrust the finger into Jackson a few more times before crooking it to curve around and hit his prostate.

“Ohhhh,” Jackson moaned, his expression distant with pleasure. He gripped the headboard hard and rode Chase's mouth. His hips involuntarily thrust back into the fingers, then forward into Chase's mouth.

He was starting to lose control, and Chase loved it.

Chase rubbed his prostate hard as he bobbed his head. Jackson's cock stiffened even further in response. This was going to be a great orgasm for him – assuming Jackson let him suck him off, that was.

“Fuck, you're gonna make me blow too early,” Jackson laughed breathlessly and started to scoot backward.

Chase let him go easy that time, but he made a mental note that Jackson might not mind a little more fingering again. “I like the sound of that.”

Chase found his knees up by his ears again, Jackson's fingers in *him* now. Jackson skillfully thrust them inside to get him hot and ready for his cock. Jackson seemed to love doing this to him, and Chase wasn't about to complain.

A couple fingers would never be the solid, filling, hot weight he craved in him, but they were a welcome tease. Jackson was *great* at teasing him.

Chase squirmed, his toes curling in the air when Jackson found just the right pressure and angle to make his back arch. He pressed his head back into the pillow and gasped for breath, trying to stutter out Jackson's name. “J-Jah... ah...”

Chase loved being bent in two and pounded into the mattress.

His cock throbbed with need now, the pink length bobbing over his chest as Jackson pulled his knees up over his shoulders. Jackson was about to give him exactly what he needed.

“Christ, Chase, you're gonna kill me if I keep going on about how hot you are...” Jackson's thick tip was rubbing across the opening and around the hole, teasing him even more.

Chase blushed. He felt the flush spread through his cheeks and over his forehead as he closed his eyes for lack of any good response. “N-No, you can keep telling me all you want.” He wanted to arch up and just push it into him, but it was only a tease until Jackson was ready.

Jackson leaned in, taking it carefully for the last few inches so as not to bend Chase too far. When his boyfriend pressed their lips together, Chase kissed him back.

“Show me what I've been missing this week.”

Jackson's eyes flashed and he accepted the challenge. He fumbled around Chase's leg to roll the condom onto his length, stroking himself hard. “Ohhh, yeah.”

Chase loved watching that hand jerk up and down the huge shaft with the ease of years of practice. Watching his boyfriend get himself off would be hot sometime, too...

Then, Jackson was finally pushing inside, his hips flexing powerfully. He drove deep into Chase and filled every inch of him with the hot, stiff rod.

“Ohhh, Christ,” Chase moaned, his body flushing with heat and pleasure and sheer overwhelming joy. His mind spun, and he dug his fingers into his own legs to keep them up near his ears so Jackson could pound into him.

“You good?”

Chase laughed breathlessly. “S-So good...”

Jackson pulled his hips back, leaving Chase aching for more within that fraction of a second. Each time Jackson's cock pushed back into him, his hips shuddered. His prostate throbbed with heat that shot straight up his core. It made his head dizzy, his heart race, and his cock twinge with the need to be gripped and jerked.

“Hnnh!” Chase dug his nails into Jackson's back and bared his teeth for a moment as he growled his pleasure. “Yes!”

“You want it hard and fast?”

“*Pleease*,” Chase moaned. He cried out when Jackson slammed into him just like he'd asked for. He was lost in pleasure, his head spinning and his mind focused only on what Jackson could give him. Jackson's cock, Jackson's kisses, Jackson's body blanketing him and pushing up into him, owning every inch of him... Hardest of all to take were Jackson's gentle whispers into his ear.

“So beautiful. Jesus, you're flexible. Look at your face. I'm gonna help you come so many times,” Jackson moaned. “As many times as you want.”

“Yees,” Chase groaned in agreement, stretching and wriggling to try

to kiss Jackson harder.

Jackson gladly met his lips, their moans stifled in each other's mouths as their lips caressed and the bed shook under them.

Chase wasn't going to last half as long as he wanted – not the way his body already surged with pent-up desires. He rolled his head back to break the kisses, but even so, Jackson's lips grazed along his neck and throat. It made him clench and quiver, his body seizing up despite no touches to his cock.

It was rare he could come just from being fucked, but Jackson was doing it. He almost teared up with how *intense* everything was: how loud, fast, deep, strong, hard, *huge*...

“Hah – almost – ah... yes...!” He was trembling on the edge against that frustrating despair. He was desperately hoping he could do it, almost too anxious to even let himself go...

“Come, baby,” Jackson grunted against his neck, kissing his cheek and lips again as he thrust into him harder. He drove past his prostate. Every time that cock rubbed the hot button of pleasure, Chase's hardened cock twitched and ached.

His own passion started to well up, his balls tightening... Chase opened his mouth to gasp Jackson's name and draw deep, panting breaths of desperation. “Ah... nnh! Hnnh!”

“C'mon. Look at you, beautiful. You feel so good,” Jackson breathed out. “You're so tight. You're shaking... the noises you make... Christ, you're incredible, Chase...”

Jackson's hot, fast pace didn't relent for a second and his head was spinning. His fingers tingled, and then...

“Y-Yes...!”

All at once, Chase's body released that well of tension and desire in quick, hard spurts. He coated their stomachs and his own chest. He clenched hard around that huge length that stretched him wide.

His thighs shook around Jackson's shoulders as his body writhed under him. Luckily, Jackson easily pinned him down, or he might well be lifting Jackson off the bed as his body heaved up against him.

“Hands-free,” Jackson marveled, sheer awe in his whisper. “Jesus. That's it, Chase...”

“Yes... oh, God, yes,” Chase moaned as the wildfire of need swept through him in burning waves and his heart pounded. He couldn't



remember *ever* feeling so close to the guy he was fucking.

Not just fucking. Already, this was more.

He whimpered again at the thought and squeezed his eyes shut. The thought made his heart race with inexplicable, deep-seated fear, yet also joy.

Chase still shivered as he came down off the high and gradually softened. He let his legs slip off Jackson's shoulders to sprawl wide open instead.

Jackson slipped out of him, but he was still hard. Chase groped at Jackson's cock to pull the condom off.

"Wha--"

"Come on me," Chase whispered, glancing down to the sticky mess he'd already left on himself. He wanted Jackson to leave his mark, too. "You like doing that? Otherwise I can suck you off..." He could still hardly breathe. He wanted Jackson to fall into the same all-consuming bliss.

He wanted Jackson to hold him close, wrap him in those strong arms all night.

"Fuck, you're incredible," Jackson whispered yet again. After the condom came off, he scooted back across Chase. Jackson closed his hand around himself to stroke hard. "I'm almost there. Just watching you – Christ, I could watch just your orgasm *face* all day..."

Chase grinned breathlessly. He moaned long and low with satisfaction. Bliss sank into him already. "C'mon, baby. Your turn."

"Y-Yeah," Jackson grunted, that hand twisting around the head as he fucked his own fist. The gleaming head pointed right at Chase's chest and stomach...

And then Chase's body was coated in their shared passion as Jackson thrust forward hard.

Deep groans of pleasure escaped his throat. Jackson thought Chase was noisy, but he had no idea how noisy *he* was, too. Chase grinned as he watched, licking his lips. He pushed himself up a little more to stick his tongue out and let a little splatter across his mouth and tongue.

"Oh, Christ," Jackson moaned breathlessly at the sight, unable to look away. He milked every last drop, then continued to stroke slower and softer. Once he began to soften, his breathing evened out. His eyes

went from hazy to clearer again as he glanced up to meet Chase's gaze.

"Hello," Chase teased when he saw Jackson tune into the moment again. It seemed to make Jackson laugh, and now was no exception. He wiped his mouth off and swallowed. "You've been saving all that for me?"

Jackson was already red and sweaty with exertion and the bliss of climax. If possible, he blushed a little more. Maybe it was just an extra bashful curve to his mouth. "You've got a fuckin' dirty mouth."

"Says Mr. 'Come for Me Hands-Free'," Chase laughed.

Jackson grinned broadly. "It worked, though, hm?" He scooted down the bed again and shifted carefully onto his side, then patted Chase's stomach. "You wanna clean that off first?"

Chase shook his head. "I wanna kiss you first. If you don't mind tasting yours—hnnh!"

Jackson's warm mouth was already on his. His lips gently caressed Chase's as his hand ran down Chase's side.

His eyes were closed, so Chase let his own lashes flutter shut and pressed forward into the kiss. Their noses bumped and their soft cocks touched as their knees tangled with each other's. Chase's hand ran down Jackson's muscled chest and stomach and hip.

Chase finally pulled back and murmured, "Now you can get me a cloth or something."

"Okay." Jackson laughed quietly to himself. The affectionate look he shot him as he climbed out of bed made Chase tingle all over again.

It was the easiest thing in the world to clean up and climb under the covers with Jackson. Chase was groggy within minutes, his back pressed to the chest of the man who'd wrapped himself around his body and his heart. Jackson was a furnace, which was perfect since he was usually cold at night.

He thought he heard Jackson say good night. Chase barely managed to murmur it himself before he was out like a light.

## Chase

As Chase slowly stretched, cozying up into the sheets, the first expression on his face was a smile. He smelled bacon. Jackson was up and making breakfast.

Oh, man, and today was a day off!

Normally he'd have slept in, but Chase was already wide-awake from excitement. He could maybe invite Jackson over. He'd have to see if Jackson planned to work that day or not. Spending the day catching up with him would be... wonderful.

He crawled out of bed and washed his face, stealing a bit of toothpaste on his finger to freshen up. He'd have to leave a toothbrush over at Jackson's from now on.

Even that thought excited him.

Once Chase was looking cute enough to be presentable, he headed downstairs.

Jackson was singing under his breath as he checked the bacon and whisked a fork in a hot pan to scramble eggs. "Duh dum... cure this overload... won't you help me cure, duh dum duh duh..."

"Good morning."

"Whoa!" Jackson jumped and spun to look at Chase, then laughed. "Ninja."

"I walk like... the night." Chase winked and came around the corner to kiss Jackson. "Need a hand? I'll set the table. I didn't know you were a singer."

Jackson cringed. "I'm *really* not."

"You sounded all right for an amateur," Chase teased. "I'm no better though."

"I'm nearly done."

When Jackson delivered a plate of food, Chase lit up with excitement. Eggs, bacon, toast, maple beans, and best of all, waffles. "You have a

waffle iron?"

"Of course I have a waffle iron," Jackson grinned. "It's a household essential."

"I'm surprised you don't just barbecue them."

"I've never tried using one on a barbecue..." Jackson looked thoughtful. "I can do pancakes..."

Chase laughed and dug into his food eagerly. They were both quiet for the first few minutes as they satisfied their hunger. Now and then, Chase glanced up. Jackson's broad frame was silhouetted by the sunlight through the kitchen windows.

He was so lucky.

"I'll walk you home, at least," Jackson told him once their plates were clear and the dishes were in the dishwasher. "I don't have to work today..."

"Really?"

"It's already mid-morning. Half the work day is gone," Jackson laughed.

Chase groaned. "Disgusting. You're an early riser? I don't know about this."

"Always have been. I noticed you sleep in... but that gives me time to cook breakfast."

"Two in one: extra sleep *and* breakfast. Works for me," Chase shrugged. "And... if you're off today, you could come home with me..."

Jackson brightened up. "I was hoping you'd say that."

Chase grinned and headed to the door to tug on his sweater and shoes. "Then you're more than welcome. You can come over any time."

"Any time at all?"

"Yeah," Chase smiled, his heart lightening. No chance he'd have some other guy over anymore. Early days yet, but he liked it this way.

"Okay."

They walked hand-in-hand down the sidewalk, loosely swinging their hands. It was a comfortable silence now. Together, they enjoyed the warmth of the sun beating down on them already. Early August afternoons were pleasant here. It wasn't the terrible, humid Toronto

heat Chase was used to.

“This is your building, right?”

The affirmative response died in Chase's throat. He stumbled to a halt when they rounded the corner of his apartment building. He dropped Jackson's hand, his hands curling into fists.

A short, stocky man was leaning on the railing outside the apartment building's front door.

No.

Chase would know him anywhere.

Before Chase could flee, his uncle Jerry's eyes flickered toward them. He jerked his chin as he approached.

Chase was frozen on the spot, his breathing quick and harsh. He still remembered the words and more that had come from his own flesh and blood. Jerry had taken it upon himself to fix him the only way he knew how: via a good kicking.

For his own good, of course. Because other people would do worse to him if he kept on this path.

Well, years later, nobody had, but Jerry still made him shake on the spot. His brain screamed at him to do something – anything – anything at all, but he couldn't even speak.

Then, Jackson's body shielded him. He'd never been more grateful for Jackson's broad, tall figure. His boyfriend stepped between them.

Chase was almost stuck in his own head, waging war against his body to move or his lips to part so he could shout something at Jerry. His hearing was faint, but he picked up on Jackson anyway.

“Who are you?”

“I ought to ask you the same.” The deep rumble of Jerry's voice made Chase's stomach turn. He wanted to shove Jackson away and tell him to fuckin' *run*, but it was all he could do to breathe. “I'm Charlie's uncle.”

Jackson glanced back at Chase, and Chase managed to make eye contact. The look was silent but easy to read: *Do you want him here?*

Wetting his lips, Chase shook his head slightly. He could move his arms now. He wrapped them around himself for a moment. He reminded himself that he was *here*, now, months later. Safe.

Sheltered by Jackson, he was safe.

Jackson looked back at Jerry, and even his aura was intimidating now as his shoulders rose. "Well, he doesn't want you here. Have a nice day."

Christ, Jackson was calm and Chase felt even more like a scared little wimp. They'd been right. He *was* all those things his parents had told him, as Jerry had shouted as the iron tang of blood shriveled his tongue... His feet came loose, too. Though his whole body shook with the invisible pains along his ribs and legs and face, he moved out to look at Jerry.

He had to look his own demon in the eye, terrified or not, and *win* this time.

Jerry scowled. "Who is this man to you? Nobody compared to your own family. Don't let him jerk you around like a bitch on a chain. Charlie, we all miss you, most of all your broth--"

"Don't say my name." Chase tried to steady his shaking arms and he couldn't, so he shoved his hands in his pockets. His breathing still came in short gasps, but it was slowing now.

"Don't you miss Luke and Buddy? It hurt your parents so much to get your response that I had to come alone to find you."

"No." Chase reached out to grab Jackson's hand abruptly. In for a penny, in for a pound. "I miss them because they're too young in Luke's case or too... too good a dog, in Buddy's case... to be as..." How could he even describe it? "As fucking *hellish* as the rest of you. Hell isn't where I'm going; it's where I left. It's back home with you all."

Jerry reeled. "How dare you?"

"How dare *you*?" Jackson snapped his fingers to draw Jerry's eyes to his own, his chest swelling. He jutted out his chin. "I've beat the shit out of guys like you before. I'll do it again unless you leave him the fuck alone. He doesn't want anything to do with any of you."

Chase's cheeks flushed with humiliation. Getting Jackson to fight his battles was low, but it was the first time he could remember feeling safe for... months.

Jerry's next words chilled Chase to the bone, making him forget his shame. "I'll be around again, when this misguided soul isn't."

Chase pulled Jackson's hand and shoved past Jerry to open the lobby door. His hands shook as Jackson stayed between them. "I don't have

anything to say to you.”

Jerry's voice was soothing again, but Chase knew exactly what ploy this was. “I have plenty left to say to you. Messages from your family.”

“Who? I don't have a family.” Chase kept his voice flat and dull, though his chest was swelling with the same pain he thought he'd finally forgotten. It was ten times more intense than it had been at Jackson's family's barbecue. No, a hundred times.

Chase let the lobby door close while Jerry watched. As he led them to the elevator, Chase grew aware of how much his hand was shaking in Jackson's.

Bless him, Jackson didn't ask – even when they reached Chase's apartment. Chase fumbled, trying three keys before he got the right one.

Once the door was closed, Jackson finally dropped Chase's hand. He strode to the window and look down across the parking lot. “What car does he drive?”

The shame was back, but worse. He had to explain this now.

Chase swallowed hard, walking up gingerly behind Jackson. “Silver Corolla. It was parked in the visitor bays.”

The spot was empty now.

He was gone, but Chase was certain it wasn't for good.

They knew where he lived now. It was only a matter of time before they found out the rest: where he worked, who Jackson was, where *he* lived...

That asshole detective. Chase was the worst scrapper in the world, but he'd lay into Alex if he showed his face again with some vague offer of help.

“Think he's gone properly?” Jackson murmured, his voice quiet.

Chase shook his head.

A warm arm circled around his shoulders. Jackson pulled Chase into his side as they scanned the parking lot together. Jackson stepped between Chase and the window to wrap him up in both arms.

Chase melted against Jackson's chest, pressing his cheek to Jackson's shoulder. He squeezed hard in return, his arms around Jackson's back.

He wasn't gonna cry like a little girl, but he'd forgotten how damn

good it felt just to be hugged.

“Okay, I need a drink,” Chase laughed quietly. “It's noon. That's not too early.”

Jackson chuckled and pressed his lips into his hair. “I think the occasion warrants it. Unless that happens every day...?”

“No. God, no,” Chase chuckled. “This was the first time.” He breathed in that musky, citrus scent and pressed his nose into Jackson's shoulder for a few more moments before letting go. He rummaged for a bottle of wine and cracked it open. He found cheese and crackers, sliced up a couple apples, and dug in the cupboard for nuts.

Where did they go? Fuck, he'd bought them.

Chase searched one cupboard, then the other, then the first again. A hiss of annoyance escaped him as frustration knotted his chest. “Fuck, I had more--”

Jackson came up behind him to kiss his shoulder and close the cupboard. “What you've got is fine.”

“I want nuts.”

“It's fine,” Jackson soothed, and Chase let his resistance melt again. Jackson was right. They'd only had breakfast an hour or so ago.

“Right, let's go to the couch...”

Jackson opened the wine bottle and started sharing the tray of appetizers with him. Though Chase was waiting, he never asked. Two glasses in, the tension higher than ever, he still hadn't.

Finally, Chase looked at him. “You gonna ask?”

“I was leaving it up to you.”

Chase bit his lip hard and poured his third glass. He settled back with it and cradled the glass against his chest. The dry bite of the white wine helped distract him, even if it was unpleasant. “That was my uncle.”

“Mmhmm.”

“They... were religious. Still are, I should say. It's the usual story.”

“When did you get out?”

“A year ago.”

Jackson frowned. “I thought you only moved here...” he trailed off.



That was the other part he hadn't wanted to say, but hey. Might as well now. Chase sighed and chugged half his glass. He couldn't help pulling a face. Ugh, it was *bone-dry*.

Jackson chuckled quietly, his hand resting on Chase's knee. He wasn't judging him or trying to stop him; he was just... *there*. Someone being there for him was new.

Chase finally admitted, "I moved out, and moved in with my ex. He was a biker. I met him at the shop I was freelancing at. He seemed like he could protect me from them, you know?"

"And the relationship didn't last?"

"He was... controlling," Chase muttered. "I have great taste in men. Out of the frying pan..." When he looked up, Jackson's eyes were like flint. He hadn't seen him this angry before, and it made Chase flinch backward. "S-Sorry. Not you."

Jackson looked startled. "No, I'm not – I'm not angry at you, babe," he murmured, squeezing Chase's knee again. He set aside the empty appetizer tray and scooted closer, resting his arm around his shoulders again.

"Okay. Sorry." Chase welcomed it and leaned into it. The warmth and comfort was exactly what he needed, even if he never would have been able to ask for it.

Jackson shook his head slightly. "For what?"

"That you had to see all that," Chase murmured. "I hate telling people. They get all pitying... and stuff..."

Jackson shook his head again, stronger this time. "I don't pity you." His firm tone made Chase look up, and then their eyes locked. "I promise I don't. I'm just pissed as *hell* at the people who thought this was okay. And if you ever need revenge..."

Chase didn't know how to explain how much that made his fear grow. Weirdly, knowing that Jackson was capable of beating the crap out of his uncle didn't make him feel better. It actually made things worse.

Now he knew Jackson was capable of the same as Jerry. But Jackson would never, ever lay into him with words or with fists...

Chase shivered again and swallowed hard, closing his eyes so as not to let Jackson see the fear that returned and knotted his breathing.

*Don't let on. Don't ever let that on.*

At last, he had a good thing going. Nobody wanted to date someone who was afraid of him.

## Jackson

Chase smiled and laughed all afternoon. They quickly finished the bottle of wine. They watched TV for a while, cooked pasta for supper, and then split another bottle of wine...

Jackson didn't buy it for a second. Those few seconds of fearful glances had told far more than Chase suspected.

Jackson had expected to hear this sometime. He hadn't expected to confront it firsthand, but some of Chase's mannerisms had made him wonder from the beginning.

He'd told the truth when he said to Chase that he didn't pity him. He was also pissed as *hell* at his family – or former family – for making him feel like this. But even those few moments of anger had startled Chase and made him withdraw.

So, Jackson decided to stay calm and play along with Chase's too-rapidly improved mood. He let him have at least a shred of his pride. This was reality for a lot of kids his own age, even more older, and still many younger. It made Jackson sick and angry, but there was precious little he could do about it.

“You know, since you're over here...” Chase smirked once the second bottle was gone – most of it into his glass. He scooted closer, running his hand up Jackson's thigh.

Normally, Jackson would have laughed and leaned into the touch, but something felt off.

“Feeling horny again? It's not just the wine talking?” he teased, resting his hand on Chase's shoulder instead of his hip or worse.

Chase winked. “Well, I gotta give you something worth fighting for.”

Jackson had been cool and collected all day, but that line made Jackson freeze.

Shit. Chase was used to trading sex for protection, wasn't he? “Did your ex take you in before or after you left?”

Chase looked confused at the question. “After. It was just a place to

stay and sex first, and then we started dating,” he drawled, his speech a little slurred. “Why?”

Jackson bit his lip. This looked a lot like a pattern. He had to be careful around Chase. “You ever worry he’d kick you out if you didn’t do things for him?”

Chase pulled his hand back from Jackson’s thigh. He looked like he resented the question, but he wouldn’t meet Jackson’s gaze, either. “Yeah.”

“It’s not like that with me,” Jackson shook his head. He let that hang in the air for a few seconds. The words were worthless, but eventually, he’d prove them. Over time. “You should get to bed. Early night for the drunk, hm?”

Chase nodded, and Jackson helped him up to his feet. He steered Chase into the bedroom and flicked on the bedside light. Then, he sat him firmly down on the bed before pulling off his t-shirt.

“Mm, baby,” Chase breathed out through the semi-darkness. He yanked his jeans off, kicking them free.

Jackson leaned in to press a gentle kiss on his shoulder and his cheek. He pulled back the covers for Chase. “Not tonight.”

Chase groaned. “But sleeping with you... is gonna be hard otherwise.”

“I’m sleeping on the couch,” Jackson told him softly. Once Chase was under the covers, he pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Night, Chase.”

“Night,” Chase murmured. Though he clearly wanted to protest Jackson’s decision, he was exhausted. His eyes shut as fast as that.

Jackson watched Chase for a few more moments. When he didn’t stir, Jackson rose to his feet, turned off the lamp, and tugged the covers up around Chase’s shoulders.

He checked the bedroom window lock, then all the other windows. He had no idea how bad this family was, and he didn’t intend to give them any chances at Chase.

*Charlie?* For the first time, he had a moment to think about that name he’d heard. Clearly, Chase didn’t like it. Maybe he’d changed his name when he ran away.

Jackson sighed and checked the door lock twice, then circled the living room. He checked all the window locks and the balcony door. They were on the third floor, but it still seemed prudent.

He crashed on the couch, turning onto his side and pulling one of the couch cushions beneath his head.

Chase needed a safer place to stay. If his family knew where he was, they could track him down and harass him when he wasn't around. That guy, Jerry, had already hinted as much.

The solution was obvious, but there was one problem. The solution: Chase could move in with him. The problem: Chase might feel obligated, even subconsciously, to have sex for protection. Just like his ex. That final piece of the puzzle was in place now, too. Jackson wasn't having any of that.

But Jackson had to do *something* to help his new boyfriend.

He barely remembered drifting off to sleep.

---

When he stirred, Jackson heard quiet sounds from the kitchen. He cracked open his eyes, rubbing them and stretching. "Oh, man..." His back was gonna kill him later.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you."

Chase looked bedraggled, but not hung-over. He was putting on toast. "S'okay," Jackson murmured. "No hangover?"

"I don't usually get them," Chase shook his head. "Want toast?"

"Sure."

Jackson gingerly sat up and stretched, trying to chase the kinks from his back. Meanwhile, Chase put on and buttered two slices of toast. He came to sit next to him on the couch.

Jackson took his plate of toast before he leaned in to kiss his forehead. "Feeling all right?"

Chase nodded, working his jaw around with a sheepish look on his face as he stared at his toast. "Yeah, yeah, I'm okay. I'm sorry you had to, you know... deal with all that."

"It's nothing to be sorry about," Jackson shook his head. "I was thinking, though..."

"Yeah?"

Jackson nibbled the crust off his toast. "Well... Your family knows where you live now, right?"

“Yeah,” Chase winced.

“And I take it that's not a good thing.”

“That's... not really, no.”

Jackson licked his lips. “If you'd feel safer elsewhere, I have lots of room. You could move in with me. Just for a few days, or weeks, or however long it takes to find a new place, or to drive your uncle out of town...” he trailed off. He crunched the rest of his toast and set the plate aside. He said around the toast, “S'totally up to you.”

Chase looked stunned. “You... you wouldn't mind?”

“Course not!” Jackson squeezed Chase's knee. “I mean, at least I can help you get a restraining order or break your lease, or whatever you have to do. I just... I can't let you face this alone.”

Chase was giving him a funny look, and Jackson couldn't quite place it at first. It took him a minute to realize that it was shock and... deep gratitude. Chase's expression was soft and warm. His eyes flickered back and forth between Jackson's.

“Thanks,” Chase finally murmured. He set aside his own half-eaten toast and leaned in for a hug.

Jackson was happy to squeeze him, pressing his cheek against Chase's. “It's all right. We'll work things out.”

Chase nodded silently, and Jackson heard his breathing hitch before it smoothed out again.

*I suppose this can't be solved by me finding him and beating the shit out of him. If only it were that easy.*

“Just one thing,” Jackson murmured, pulling back. “Something you said last night.”

Chase winced. “Embarrassing?”

“No. Just that you... used to worry about your ex, um... kicking you out.”

Chase's eyes widened, his lips parting before he tried to hide his surprise. He didn't go around blurting that out to everyone. “Right?”

“I don't want you feeling like I'm taking advantage of you. I'm... not comfortable with us having sex while you're relying on me for shelter.”

Chase looked stunned. “Oh.”

“Is that... a problem?”

Chase slowly shook his head. “I mean, I'm gonna be horny as fuck, but...”

“Not saying I won't be, too,” Jackson laughed. “Just for the first week or something, until we're both settled. I just... I feel uncomfortable with it is all.”

Chase nodded. “No, I think I get why. When you put it that way... it *does* sound a bit...” he trailed off.

Jackson didn't want to fill in *manipulative* while Chase was thinking through his past. Instead, he clapped Chase's knee again and squeezed. “kay? We good?”

“We're good,” Chase confirmed. For the first time since they'd seen Jerry, his shoulders were down and his breathing was easy. If not completely carefree, he at least looked grounded again. His lips even curved up in a beautiful smile that crept over his lips.

When he leaned into kiss Jackson, Jackson slipped his arm around Chase's shoulder. He kissed him gently in return.

*You're worth fighting for.*

It might be a lifelong task to get Chase to see that, but Jackson didn't mind one bit.

## Chase

"I'll be back in... forty minutes or so," Jackson promised, squeezing Chase's hand. "I'll just grab moving boxes and my truck and we'll get your important stuff moved over to my place today."

Chase squeezed back, then let go. He pulled open the door to his apartment. "Okay. Thanks. See you in a bit."

"Stay here until I get back, okay?"

"Yeah," Chase laughed under his breath. *That* wasn't a problem. He wasn't unlocking the door for anyone after the close call they'd had last night.

Jackson leaned in and down the couple inches that separated them to peck his lips. He headed out to the elevator with another wave.

After waving back, Chase let the door close, locked it, and leaned against it.

This was all happening so fast. Since Jackson had suggested moving in with him, they'd only needed a couple minutes to discuss it. When they'd agreed he should move in with Jackson today, Jackson had sprung into action.

Chase could tell he liked having a plan, and a way to help. He was grateful that Jackson was so determined to help keep him safe. He still felt weirdly squirmy inside about having someone else – another guy, no less – shelter him from his family. He'd hoped he was man enough to stand up to them himself, but... when he'd tried, he'd just shut down.

Chase was fulfilling everything they'd predicted, and he hated it.

He shook his head, rubbing a hand down his face. "Just shut up," he muttered to himself. He strode to the bedroom to choose a pile of clothes he'd bring. In the bathroom, he packed up his essentials. The kitchen was his next stop, to bring perishable foods and alcohol.

It took less time than he'd expected to gather everything worth bringing. After all, he didn't have a lifetime of trinkets to sort through. He'd done this twice now, and every time, he lost more and more



excess stuff. He was a minimalist, but by force, not choice.

Chase shivered when he grabbed his bag of sex supplies: condoms, lube, a couple toys. He'd need those if Jackson held out on him.

Not that he blamed him. Part of him – a large part of him, actually – was relieved that Jackson had laid down that ground rule from the start.

That meant more to him than all the empty words in the world.

But what if Chase scared him off by being his usual flirtatious, sexual self? He hardly knew how to relate to men except with sex. As much as a problem as he knew that was, it had worked more or less fine for him in the past. Now he was going to have to get to know his boyfriend by living with him before he slept with him again. It was gonna be downright weird.

Living with his boyfriend. God, it had been a while since he'd done that. After fleeing his ex, Will, he'd lived in crappy Ontario apartments before escaping out here. It had gotten bad enough he'd considered adopting a cat just to keep him company. But he'd never felt responsible enough to have one.

Jackson's knock interrupted his reverie.

Chase lit up with a sudden grin. He'd thought of the possibility that it was Jackson *before* worrying that it was his family. Something had changed.

Sure enough, the peephole showed him it was his boyfriend. Jackson's muscled arms wrapped around an armful of flattened boxes. He had a roll of packing tape in one hand, his car keys dangling from a finger.

Chase hastily unlocked the door and yanked it open. "I'm already packed."

"Great," Jackson grinned. He stepped sideways through the door to toss the boxes on the floor in the living room. "This won't take much time. When do you work?"

"One PM. Class right after that."

Jackson checked his phone. "Oh yeah, we'll be fine. Do you think this is enough boxes? I have more in the truck."

"Oh, yeah." The half-dozen identical, flattened boxes looked like more than enough room.

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As small as the five filled boxes had looked in the middle of his living room, they looked even smaller in Jackson's guest room.

Chase grimaced at the stack of boxes in the corner of the room. It was a beautiful enough room next to Jackson's master bedroom, but... it wasn't where he wanted to be. He squared his jaw, prepared to argue. "I can do the no-sex thing, but... I'd rather stay in your room at night."

Jackson's arms slipped around his waist. "Okay."

"Okay?" Chase blinked. That was easy. He leaned into Jackson's chest and rested his head against his shoulder.

Jackson rubbed his back. "That's fair. We'll just use this room to store your stuff. I'm renovating my master to include this space anyway. We'll have more than enough room."

Chase nodded. He wanted to sink into Jackson's arms and make out on the couch to forget the stress, but work called. "It's almost noon, isn't it?"

"Mmhmm. I'll make you a quick lunch before you go."

Chase's chest felt warm. He was well cared for. "Thank you."

"Get changed or unpacked or whatever you wanna do," Jackson instructed. He kissed the top of Chase's head. "Come downstairs when you're ready."

Chase grabbed his shoulder to keep him close. He leaned in to brush their lips together. The kiss was so light it was almost teasing. Jackson's eyes closed and he leaned into it. After a few more moments, Chase pulled back. "Okay."

"Mm." Jackson smiled. He pulled away again to head downstairs.

Lunch turned out to be homemade creamy chicken pasta. Chase polished off his bowl without thinking twice about it. It was so much better than the boxed stuff. Jackson was as good in the kitchen as he was in bed.

When Chase told him as much, Jackson laughed richly and stood up to gather their dishes. "Get to work, you," he teased. "Want me to drive you?"

For the first time since last night, Chase felt safe. He shook his head. He could deal with one little walk to work, especially since his family

didn't know he was here. "I'll be fine."

"Text me when you get there, okay? And before you leave to walk home."

Jackson's worry for him was adorable, and Chase glowed as he nodded. "I will."

"See you later. Have a good day."

*This* was what Chase had missed about living with someone. He bit his lip and nodded. "You too." It was the hardest thing to pull himself away from the table and grab his shoes to head out the door. Stalkers or not, they both had work to do. He couldn't pull Jackson away for days on end, and Floyd expected him to be on time.

Though he kept his fist curled around his keys in his pocket for the walk to work, he didn't see any familiar faces. By the time he got to the tattoo shop, Chase was a little more relaxed.

"Hey, Floyd."

"Hey, man." Floyd was just seeing out a customer who'd gotten a fresh tattoo, and Chase tried to steal a peek. Already bandaged, though. "You have a good day. Call me if there's any complications, right?"

"Okay."

Floyd turned his attention to Chase. "How's it going?"

*If only you knew.* Chase laughed under his breath. "Uh, not bad. You?"

"All right." The door closed behind the customer, and Floyd looked at him. "Had some guy in here asking about you."

Chase's stomach sank. He curled his hands into fists again. *There's only a couple shops in town. It's easy enough to find me. He probably just went to each one.* "Right..."

"He looked a little shifty though. I told him nobody by that description worked here. He brought a couple photos that looked a lot like your work."

Chase could tell he was expected to spill the beans. He sighed, walking up to the counter despite his instincts telling him to flee or freeze. "Yeah. They probably were. Thanks, man."

"You're welcome. That was the right thing to do – say you weren't here?"

Chase nodded.

“So?” Floyd raised his eyebrows, then jerked his chin in a silent command to tell him what that was about.

“Uh... A few people I don't wanna find are trying to find me,” Chase told him. Even as he said it, it sounded melodramatic and he cringed. “Just family stuff.”

Floyd paused, his eyes narrowing. “This about the same thing as before? You gone to the cops?”

Chase shook his head. “I'm taking steps of my own.” *Like... fencing? That won't protect me. I'd never be able to actually wield a weapon against my own flesh and blood. Moving in with Jackson? More like running away.*

Floyd nodded slowly. “Just don't run off on me, all right? If you need help, I'll figure out something with you.”

“Yeah. Thanks,” Chase murmured and pushed himself away from the counter to get to work.

Floyd clapped his arm. “Welcome. So, we got a couple new bookings...”

As Floyd filled him in on their upcoming clients, Chase's mind wandered.

Maybe Floyd was right. Maybe all he was doing was running. Sooner or later, he had to face his own problems and tell them to fuck off once and for all.

Thomas

“What the hell? Dude, come look at this.”

Thomas raised his eyebrow and abandoned the frying pan to take a look out the front window. Cameron was kneeling on his couch, shamelessly spying through the blinds.

“The neighbors are gonna judge us,” Thomas muttered.

“Who cares what the neighbors think? Jackson's moving boxes inside.”

That *was* odd. As they watched, Jackson came back into view, walking down his driveway toward his truck. They both spotted someone next to him: Chase. The wiry little tattooed guy who they'd all met not long ago at that barbecue.

More than that, the guy that Jackson liked...

Thomas *still* hadn't told Cam. It was a testament to how well he could zip his lips when one of his brothers asked him to.

“What's he moving?” Cam murmured, folding his arms on the windowsill.

Thomas sighed and smacked Cam's shoulder. “Okay, enough spying. You can ask him later.”

“He hasn't told us about Chase renting the basement or anything...”

*Aha. Perfect excuse.* “Yeah? He said he was planning to reno it. Maybe he's storing stuff for Chase, or Chase is... I don't know, helping him renovate.”

“Those looked like our old moving boxes.”

Cam looked out the window again, trying to get a better glimpse. Thomas kicked Cam in the shin, harder this time.

“Ow! Bastard.”

“Don't snoop around,” Thomas shook his head. “Nobody likes a snoop.”

Cameron rolled his eyes at him. “Ugh. Fine. What do you wanna talk

about?"

"How are things going with you and Noah? You two were talking about moving in together..." Thomas seized on the first subject that came to mind as he walked back to the frying pan to finish cooking them lunch.

"Well, yeah. He has to hand in his notice soon if he's moving out in November."

"Right." Thomas was familiar with the cost of breaking leases. He'd done it to move back here from Halifax in May, and that thousand bucks had stung. "And?"

He turned off the frying pan heat and picked up his Coke bottle for a sip. Normally it would be a beer, but he'd quietly switched to pop while his big brother was around in solidarity. At least, he hoped it would help Cam feel a little less depressed about all the things he couldn't yet do.

"He's gonna do it." Cameron was smiling to himself, fidgeting with his own bottle. "Um, he said he's excited, and... we're already planning out where his stuff will go."

Thomas raised his eyebrows. "Oh! Nice..."

"We want him good and settled before surgery and recovery. It's gonna be hard being around him and not being able to... you know."

Thomas groaned. "My sympathies, but say no more."

Cam laughed. "Well, you know, it's been getting worse. I mean, before they told me I wasn't allowed, I was already cutting back, but... we slip sometimes. But, hell. Quickies now and then really don't--"

"No more," Thomas echoed himself, louder this time and laughing.

"Sorry," Cameron grinned, moving to the table as Thomas served them both lunch. "But, you know. Of all the shitty things."

"I bet." Thomas snorted. "Moving in will keep you distracted. He'll want to repaint and everything."

As Cameron laughed, Thomas's mind fixed on that phrase: moving in.

That was it: Chase was definitely moving in. Jackson had only been dating him for, what, a week? Two? Jackson was being purposefully vague, but it couldn't have been much longer than that. They hadn't seemed involved when he'd met Chase at the barbecue.

Crap. His brother didn't usually move too fast. This was...not like him. They were gonna have to talk to him about this.

Jackson

“So, you think we should put in rolling doors? Bilateral, so we can open them up to use as much space as possible?”

“That'd look best.” Cam was leaning on the barbecue as he looked up and down the length of their yards. “It looks awesome when it's open like this, though.”

Thomas cleared his throat. “We can always just... build out our own areas with landscaping to keep them separate.”

Jackson glanced at their younger brother. That was a good point. “Why have fences at all? Except for the outside of our three properties. I mean, none of us want our own zones to defend.”

Cam laughed. “Excuse you, I plan to keep a Super Soaker by my bed.”

*Do I make the joke? Nah... he's my brother.* Jackson choked back a laugh and just shook his head. “Okay, so... ditch the partial fences and go for a continuous flow between our yards?”

“We have to keep it *kinda* resale-worthy, in case we decide to ditch these places,” Cam reminded him.

“Right. Well, it doesn't all have to flow. We can still have separate zones within our property boundaries. Thomas can put in a fish pond and reading nook. I can have a massive grilling deck. Cam can have... I don't know, whatever he wants.”

“Noah wants a sunbathing area.”

“Really?” Thomas asked.

Cam smirked. “Yeah. I'll screen *that* in.”

“Oh, God,” Jackson laughed. “Please do. But yeah, we'll each have our own zones so each yard will feel different. We'll keep that landscaping closer to the house and leave the back area free for one continuous flowing lawn from end to end. We can even get a flower bed or something down along the bottom fence to make it feel like it flows.”

Thomas quirked a brow. “Flow isn't a real word anymore.”



"You know what I mean," Jackson groaned.

"I know," Thomas laughed. "I like the idea."

"Me, too," Cam agreed, clapping his hands. "Almost the same plan with the landscaping, then, but minus the fencing."

"Makes it a lot cheaper," Jackson nodded.

Cam glanced at Thomas and Jackson. "And the yards will be good and open until after the barbecue, right?"

"Oh, shit, right." Cam and Thomas insisted on organizing this neighborhood barbecue. They said he needed to make better friends with people around who might complain about the forge.

Jackson knew they were right: backyard forges *were* risky. Still, people around here seemed nice enough. If not, he could always go threaten them a little until they magically turned nice.

"So, is Chase gonna be around for that...?" Cam asked.

*Oh, boy.* Jackson sank onto the picnic bench and kicked out his legs. He braced his arms against the table behind him. "Yeah, probably. He's moving in."

Thomas's eyebrows shot up and his little brother stared at him.

Cam asked what Thomas was thinking. "Are you guys dating?"

Would Chase want him to say? Well... they *had* agreed to go out, exclusively. Jackson wasn't going to hide it.

"Yes."

Cam stumbled against the barbecue for a moment. He stepped forward to slap Jackson's shoulder in a mix of scolding annoyance and pride. "Congratulations. Jesus, you couldn't have hid it better, eh?"

"Sorry," Jackson laughed. He glanced at Thomas, too. "I was just... nervous about what might happen. I wasn't sure he wanted to date."

"Aww," Thomas teased. "And he was shy."

"I wasn't," Jackson grumbled, his cheeks hot. What a warm August day it was. He pushed himself up to his feet to start scrawling a new rough plan for their yards.

"He didn't want to tell you and Noah in case you made fun of his *obvious* lovebird act." Thomas spoke loudly so Jackson couldn't ignore him.

Cam punched Jackson's shoulder again. "Dick. You pays your money, you takes your teasing."

"I know, I know," Jackson groaned and rolled his eyes. "Shut up, you two. I gotta get my engineer buddy on the plans for the decks. Come on, show me where you each want your decks."

He managed to distract them by walking and marking out the rough outlines of where their back decks would go. They planned out how they'd join them together so they never had to shovel between their back doors in the winter or step on muddy ground when running between houses in the spring or autumn. And for summer, there would be even more epic back deck barbecues. They'd just have to build it carefully so they could separate the decks later, if they resold the houses.

Cam didn't shut up for long, though. "So have you been dating for a while? I mean, you met at that show, right?"

"No, not at all. We were thinking about it for a couple weeks," Jackson shook his head. "Dating officially for about a week now."

Cam tried to hide his worry, but it was plain. "And he's moving in...?"

"Oh, no, shit. It's not a relationship thing," Jackson hastily explained. "It's... I don't know how much he wants to say, but he needs a place to stay other than his place right now, so I offered him mine."

"Ohhh." Cam drove another stake into the ground and tied string around it. He was marking the walkway to the sundeck Noah wanted. "Is he all right?"

"He will be."

Cam smiled, and Jackson returned the smile with a sincere one of his own. The worst had to be behind Chase now. Jackson could help him make sure of that.

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"Pork and... are those sweet potato fries?"

"Good nose," Jackson complimented, beaming as the front door closed. "Welcome home." He was just overseeing the last few minutes of the green beans cooking. He'd timed this meal just right.

Chase looked embarrassed but thrilled. He kicked off his shoes and padded through the living room, his nose in the air as he smelled the

spicy, sweet pork chop rub that wafted through the kitchen. "You're cookin' supper for me? You didn't have to. I should be cooking for *you*."

"Yeah, well, you can do breakfast or something," Jackson waved. "Or maybe lunch. I enjoy this."

Chase came around the counter and sidled up beside him to kiss him hello. "You do?"

"Mmhmm." Jackson transferred his spatula to the other hand. He slid his arm around Chase's shoulders and pulled him in for a few slow kisses. Then, he scooted them aside a little. "Watch out, the oil might splatter you."

"I'll live," Chase promised with a quiet laugh. He moved where Jackson guided him nonetheless. He kept his firm hold around Jackson's waist. "Did you have a good day?"

Jackson had only once lived with a guy, and it had lasted four months before he'd decided to pick up and move. That had been years ago. The second shot at their relationship had gone miserably. He hadn't lived with anyone since. Jackson had completely forgotten what it felt like to welcome his boyfriend home after a long day of work.

It was a deep-seated contentment. "Very good," Jackson answered. "We're getting plans drawn up for my master bedroom reno. And the back decks."

"Yeah? Any forging?"

"Just a little. I'm starting to make fireplace tool sets. They're popular Christmas gifts."

Chase looked surprised. "Oh, yeah. I suppose they would be. Like pokers and... I don't know, bellows?"

Jackson grinned. "I can't make bellows, but like that, yeah." He kissed Chase on the lips again and murmured, "Wanna sit down? I'll bring your plate over."

"Thanks." Chase didn't let him go without hooking his fingers through his belt loops. He pulled him close for one more long, slow, soft kiss.

Christ, Jackson wanted that talented mouth all over him. It was going to be goddamn near-impossible to keep his hands off. He *had* to keep his word and show Chase that he wasn't taking advantage of him.

Speaking of which...

“How did work and fencing go?”

Chase grimaced. “Good, overall. I learned a lot at fencing. My muscles hurt. At work, uh, Floyd turned away someone – sounded like my uncle – who was looking for me. He must be going around the local tattoo shops.”

“Ah,” Jackson frowned. He scooped sweet potato fries onto both of their plates, followed by the buttery green beans. Last but not least, he placed a pork chop on each plate and sprinkled a sprig of fresh parsley and some dried herbs on top of each. With a little extra marinade, the plates were ready. “You think you should talk to the cops or what?”

“No. They’ll want me to press charges or else they can’t do anything.” Chase propped his elbow on the table and chin on his fist. He perked up at the sight of the plates Jackson was carrying over. “Oooh. Wow, those look great!”

“Thanks.” Jackson beamed and set the plates down. He popped the cork on the bubbly fruit spritzer he’d picked up at the store that afternoon. It was non-alcoholic, but it would complement the rich, herby pork well.

Chase was glowing again, his worry from moments ago fading. “You really like cooking.”

“Yeah, I do.” Jackson nudged Chase’s glass closer and took his own. He picked it up to clink against his. “To... To us.”

“To us,” Chase echoed. He clinked their glasses and sipped. “Mm. This is good.”

“Isn’t it?”

They didn’t talk much for the first few minutes, except for Chase admiring the meal. Then, they lapsed into an easy conversation. They talked about forging fireplace tools, tattooing snakes, fencing footwork, and what kind of backyard features Jackson wanted.

Jackson cleared up the dishes with Chase’s help, thankful for the dishwasher.

“I’ll help you wash the pots and pans, too,” Chase told him.

It was only fair, if he was a house guest, to let him work at the normal chores. Jackson nodded. “I’ll wash, you dry?”

“Sounds fair. Put those muscles to good work,” Chase teased, and Jackson laughed.

They bantered while they worked, easily falling into a companionable routine. Chase kept brushing against and behind him while putting away dishes. He flicked Jackson's ass with the towel once and Jackson flicked soap at him in return.

"Leave the last pots, you troublemaker," Jackson waved him off with a laugh. "Molesting me while I work..."

"I aim to please," Chase winked and leaned in to peck his lips. "But I'm at your service. If you'd rather I fucked off to the living room..."

Jackson laughed again and pressed a little kiss to Chase's lips. "Go find something on the television."

Chase squeezed his arm and put back the towel, then trotted off around the counter. He headed just around the corner, into the part of the living room with the TV and couch.

Jackson lingered for a few moments to rinse out the sink and cool off. It was damn near irresistible to just take Chase to bed, and Chase was pushing hard. Every little flirtatious gesture and word made that much clear.

*I don't think he realizes he's doing it.* Jackson licked his lips. *And I don't want to hurt his feelings when I turn him down. It'll still feel like rejection, even if I said ahead of time I'm not gonna do it.* Had he made a mistake in inviting Chase to live with him this early? Especially out of need rather than the usual cohabiting couple's desire to spend their lives together? Had this been about his own ego?

Jackson prayed it wasn't a mistake. They'd known each other for months, but romance had only started to crop up this month – and be acknowledged in the last few weeks. As far as actually calling each other boyfriends, that was even newer. Yet, already, this relationship was one he'd be crushed to lose.

## Chase

Jackson was the sexiest man alive. Just watching him cook was hot enough. Flirting with him, helping him clean up, getting him flustered by touching and tempting him...

Tonight would be hot.

When Jackson joined him on the couch, Chase let Jackson slide his arm around him. He leaned into his chest, watching the game show on TV without complaint. Within minutes, he reached over to lace his fingers with Jackson's other hand. He squirmed enough to lean up and kiss him.

Jackson kissed him a few times back, and then the commercials ended.

Chase sighed and turned to watch the TV again, letting his palm rest on Jackson's knee instead. He had to be feeling hot, too, but he wasn't initiating anything yet.

After the game show ended, a nature documentary about the oceans came on and Chase glanced at him. "You mind this?"

"No, I like nature channels," Jackson told him.

"Good. You like the ocean?"

"I have positive feelings, yes," Jackson laughed. "It does sustain life."

Chase smirked and sidled closer. "You know what else sustains life?"

Jackson laughed and nudged him. "You're missing the intro."

"Fine," Chase laughed, leaning back into Jackson's arm and rubbing his leg idly. He paid attention to the narrator telling them about the history of the ocean.

It didn't take long before the heat crawling under his skin became hard to bear, though. Chase sidled closer until their thighs pressed together.

"You wanna kiss me again?" Jackson grinned. "You have a particular look about you."

*That's an understatement.* Chase licked his lips and turned to press his shoulder into the couch. When Jackson's arms rose to slide around him, his thoughts turned triumphant. *I've got him.*

Their lips were warm and soft, sensually sliding against each other. Jackson's tongue tip teased Chase's lower lip. He moaned and shivered, and he felt Jackson shiver in return. That tongue felt so good elsewhere...

Chase sucked Jackson's lower lip between his and nipped lightly, grazing teeth along soft flesh until Jackson gasped. Chase kissed it better. He pressed open-mouthed, light kisses against Jackson's lips until Jackson relented and pressed close again.

"Hnngh."

Chase was pleased to hear the grunt slip from Jackson's throat. Jackson's fingertips dug into his back and his nails grazed their way up his spine.

When Chase's cock was pressing hard against his jeans, he shifted to try to roll over and straddle Jackson's lap. Jackson pressed his hip to keep him sitting flat. "Nnh?"

Jackson shook his head. "We're not having sex and I don't want you getting blue balls."

The disappointment was visceral. Chase flinched and looked away for a moment, until he felt less like he'd been slapped. Sure, Jackson had *said* that yesterday, but... had he really meant it? A week was going to be *torture*. He didn't even want to think about longer periods.

Or was there something else besides gentlemanly behavior? Chase's fears kicked into overdrive. Nobody had turned him down like this before without having *something* be wrong. He shook his head. "Don't you find me hot?"

"Oh, yes," Jackson breathed out. He laced his fingers with Chase's and dragged Chase's hand across his thigh to his groin.

Christ, *that* was a boner. Chase's cheeks flushed with the desire to go down on it. Jackson raised Chase's hand to his lips to kiss it instead.

"But I don't want you to feel pressured to satisfy me," Jackson murmured. He waited until Chase made eye contact before he went on. "It's not your duty. Sex isn't rent you pay to exist as a person, or a gay man, or a guest in my house."

Far more so than the rejection moments ago, that was a punch in the

stomach, but it wasn't from Jackson himself. The words hit Chase much harder than he'd have expected.

It was enough to kill the mood between them. Strangely, Chase didn't feel the crushing disappointment he would have moments before.

He was too busy reeling from the words. How much of his hypersexuality was down to exactly that? Did Jackson already have him pegged after knowing him for, Christ, a couple months? Knowing him well for just a couple weeks?

Chase had thought he was hard to read. How much of him was that easy?

"You all right?" Jackson murmured, his voice gentle.

Chase nodded. This time when he scooted closer, Jackson pulled him in and hugged hard.

"I work first thing tomorrow. You wanna come to bed with me?" Chase murmured. He wasn't even going to address what Jackson had said. He had way too much thinking about it to do first.

Jackson wasn't pushing him, either. He nodded, loosening his grip so Chase could stand up first and help pull him to his feet.

Hand-in-hand, they walked up the narrow staircase, Chase one step ahead.

Chase only let go to grab pajamas from his clothing box and bring them back to Jackson's room. They changed for bed together. Even though Chase appreciated the muscular body in front of him, the sexual tension had died down.

Chase was shocked at how much of a relief it was.

He crawled close to Jackson's side of the bed and slipped under the covers, and Jackson followed suit. Jackson didn't even complain at Chase spooning backward into him and lying on his arm. Chase tried to scoot to find a position where he wouldn't cut off his circulation.

"It's okay," Jackson chuckled quietly. "I'll move you if I have to."

"Okay," Chase murmured, shivering again at the lips pressing against the back of his neck. He closed his eyes as Jackson turned out the light.

They lay together for a few minutes, their bodies warm and pressed together back to front.



Just in case, Chase tried to memorize this feeling: Jackson's strong arms circling him. One under him, one draped over his side, Jackson's hand against his chest. Perfect. It was... perfect.

## Jackson

Jackson tried his hardest to keep Chase from jumping his bones. Any man's willpower would be tested by waking up with a sexy man pressed hard against him. At least, that was what Jackson told himself. He struggled not to grind against Chase's sexy little ass.

It didn't help that Chase was slowly stretching and squirming his way to wakefulness. Jackson's fingertips pressed hard into Chase's arm as he tried to catch his breath and pull away.

"Morning," Chase murmured. Finally, the overwhelming heat of their bodies pressed together faded. He pulled away enough to roll onto his back, then his side. He faced Jackson this time.

"Good morning," Jackson greeted, reaching out to push Chase's hair away from his eyes. "You sleep well?"

"Like a dream," Chase admitted, yawning. "Wh'time is it?"

"Seven."

"*Christ*, that's early," Chase groaned, his voice hoarse from sleep. He cleared his throat.

Jackson laughed. It was actually a little late to him, but it felt like taunting to say that since Chase wasn't a morning guy. "I'll be in the workshop today. You work this morning, right?"

"Mmhmm." Chase covered his mouth, yawned and stretched, looking much more awake now. He scooted close to kiss Jackson.

Jackson pecked his lips in return. "You're a sound sleeper."

"I know." Chase ran his hand lightly down Jackson's side until it rested on his hip, folding his other arm under his head. The morning light streamed down over the bed and along the pillow, highlighting every curve and sleek angle of his slim body. He looked... beautiful. "Hope I didn't put your arm to sleep."

*Your boyfriend waking up in bed with sunlight streaming over him? Christ, it's a trope, but it's true.* Jackson could hardly look away. "Nah. You're light," he teased.

The mood between them was much lighter than it had been the night before. Chase wasn't coming on during every spare moment. Even now, his affection was... different.

Jackson's carefully considered words had actually sunk in. He was used to his brothers brushing his advice off – especially Cam – no matter how much they valued it. Having this man listen so well had been almost disconcerting.

“Before we get up...” Chase was rubbing Jackson's hip lightly. “I wanna do something.”

Or maybe the words hadn't sunk in. Jackson frowned, troubled. He opened his mouth to protest, but Chase shook his head.

“No, no, hear me out. I heard what you said. It... Christ, I'm gonna have to process it for days. You should warn people before you do that.”

Jackson was startled into a laugh. “Sorry.”

“It's okay,” Chase smiled. “I wanna please you. Not as a favor or... *rent*... or anything. But because I woke up in your arms and I really liked it. And you. And I want you to feel good.”

His words were honest and straight to the point. They dissolved the tension Jackson had been holding in his chest. It wasn't Jackson's job to hold sex out over Chase until he thought he was ready for it. It was just his job to make sure he wasn't feeling pressured into it, and it didn't sound like he was.

“Okay,” Jackson murmured, but first, he pulled Chase in to kiss him again. “You're incredibly sweet.”

Chase blushed, and Jackson grinned at the sight of the redness creeping along his cheeks and up to his ears. “Th-Thanks.” Chase awkwardly fumbled with the compliment for a second before brushing it off. He shoved the covers away and scooted further down the bed.

Jackson was already itching and tingling for attention. His body had responded to Chase's presence. Just the *promise* of a blowjob had him half-hard by the time Chase's hands ran over his groin.

“Ohhh. God,” Jackson moaned, pressing his head back into the pillow. He arched slightly off the bed when Chase tugged his boxers down so his flushed, throbbing cock head popped free. Slowly, the waistband ran down the rest of the shaft and then around his thighs.

Chase lapped at the head of his cock and licked gently at the

frenulum. Jackson's thighs quivered as he pushed his feet into the bed.

This was *intense*.

It had been eons since he'd last had morning sex, and he'd forgotten how fucking good it was. The hours of being pressed against the warm, firm heat of a cute little ass had him on edge already.

Chase swirled his tongue around the head of Jackson's cock. He sucked it between his lips and smoothly bobbed his head down, shifting on his elbows and knees to a better position. One hand closed around the base of Jackson's cock to stroke it all the way down, and back up as he started bobbing his head.

Chase was fucking *incredible*.

Jackson swallowed back his first moan, but the feelings were too intense: he couldn't hold back the second one, or the ones that followed. Chase's mouth was wet and hot and *perfect*.

"D-Do... Hey, Chase..." he breathed out. Chase slowly pulled his head up to the tip. He popped his lips off the head and stroked the shaft. "D'you wanna fuck my mouth, too?"

"Same time?" Chase grinned. "69?"

Jackson nodded. Sure, it could be awkward, but it could also be fuckin' good. Something told him it was worth a shot. Besides, he really wanted to return the attention Chase was paying him.

"Sure," Chase agreed after a moment's thought. "But I haven't, er..."

"You've never done it?"

Chase blushed and shook his head. "I've given a lot of blowjobs, but never..."

"Not even in college with, like, college boyfriends?" Jackson marveled. "Testing out the Kama Sutra, y'know?"

Chase laughed, his strokes slowing before he let go of Jackson's throbbing cock. He left it aching for more contact. "No. Never."

Jackson patted his ass firmly. "C'mon, turn that cute little ass around and get your PJs off."

It was a mutual fumble to yank off shirts and boxers now as they ground together. Jackson's wet, aching cock kept grinding against bare skin. He wouldn't mind just frotting against Chase sometime, pressing their cocks between their firm bodies...

Once Chase was naked, he slapped that ass lightly and moaned. "God, you're hot. Turn around."

Chase blushed. "Just, like, hands and knees?"

"Mmhmm."

Chase shifted, turning around until that gorgeous butt was all Jackson could see.

He grinned with appreciation. "A little further back... that's it."

When Chase's cock brushed against Jackson's chin, he reached out to run a hand up Chase's side to his ribs, then back down his back. It was always strange touching a lover in reverse, a bit like petting an animal the wrong way. It just *felt* incorrect.

But there was something about the newness that was exciting, particularly for Chase.

Chase's dick stiffened easily as Jackson mouthed his way from tip to base. Jackson gently licked his balls, then pressed a few kisses just behind them before licking his way back again. He kissed along the seam. He loved the way Chase's dick twitched as it hardened.

"Oh, yeah," he heard Chase quietly whisper to himself and grinned without commenting. Moments later, warm wetness closed around the head of his own cock again. Chase swallowed his cock down to the base. It had to go into his mouth at a different angle this time, but it almost fit better this way. The head slid right down the tight ring of Chase's throat as Chase deep-throated him.

"Hnngh!" Jackson groaned, the vibrations quivering through Chase's cock as he sucked the tip of it. He kept his tongue dancing around the frenulum to get Chase warmed up, too.

"Nnh-- hnnh, hah..." Chase panted as best he could as he bobbed his head up and down the shaft awkwardly.

It was sort of the wrong angle, especially now that Chase was hard, but Jackson was determined to make it work. He reached up to grab Chase's thighs and keep him steady, and Chase moaned.

Oh, *fuck*, the vibrations felt incredible! Jackson treated Chase to a groan in return. Their noises quickly started to come with every bob and suck in an incredible feedback loop.

Chase stumbled now and then, losing his balance over Jackson. Jackson gripped his thighs hard to keep him in place and bobbed his head as best he could from underneath.

When Chase pulled his mouth off Jackson's cock, Jackson gasped around Chase's cock. He pulled his head up, licking rapid circles around the tip.

“*Fuck*, Jackson, s'too hard to... focus when you – hnnh! When you do that! Christ. Oh, fuck, yes...!” Chase whimpered, his thighs already tensing up and trembling.

It was gonna be easy to see when he was ready to come, at least.

Jackson redoubled his efforts, sucking harder on the tip. He kept swirling his tongue as he twisted his hand up and down the shaft.

Chase's thickness swelled in his hand and between his lips. Then, Chase was coating his throat with sticky, warm passion that Jackson loved swallowing. Each little lick of his tongue as he swallowed made Chase's hips snap forward again. The hard, warm flesh sliding across his tongue was addictive.

“Ohhh, God,” Chase whimpered, rubbing his cheek along Jackson's aching-hard dick. “Oh my god, I didn't warn you, s-sorry... oh, Christ, that's amazing. Don't stop... please...”

Jackson bobbed his head slower now, still maintaining light suction around Chase's shaft. He sucked every little squirt until Chase was dry. He swirled his tongue until it ached, never relenting on his firm grip around the base of Chase's shaft. “Nnh! Oh, hnnh, J-Jackson, I... nnh... mmm...” a series of low moans escaped Chase with each squirt and thrust.

Chase had never come so fast and easily, and Jackson *loved* it.

Chase shuddered again, his hips pushing forward to slide his softening cock across Jackson's tongue. He let out a long, slow breath. “O-Okay, Christ. That's good. Oh, God, Jackson. Nnh, I'm... That was so good.”

Jackson slowly pulled his mouth up and off Chase's shaft. He was grateful that the awkward angle was over, at least. He kissed Chase's thigh and stomach playfully and carefully rolled Chase until he was on his side.

Chase didn't stay there for longer than two seconds before he scrambled around.

Jackson leaned back, sitting up against the headboard now. His cock stood up straight, the flushed head begging for attention. It was a prickly fire of discomfort, yet extreme arousal. He *had* to come. He was on the edge and Chase had teased him to the very precipice before pulling away to enjoy his own orgasm.

“Whoa, you can take a sec-- *Nnngh!*”

Chase knelt between his legs and wrapped his hand around the shaft. He smoothly pushed the head between his lips. The sudden warm wet of Chase's tongue under Jackson's cock head made his whole body pulsate with pleasure.

Jackson grabbed the back of Chase's head and Chase moaned his approval, pulling Jackson's other hand toward his hair, too. With both his hands on the back of Chase's head, it was the hardest thing in the world not to fuck that beautiful mouth.

Chase's lips were already stretched around his thick shaft, his eyes flickering up to meet Jackson's. They were hazy and flushed, especially when he pushed his head down to take Jackson's entire cock into his mouth and throat.

Jackson had *seconds*, if even that.

“Ch-Chase, I – Chase, I'm gonna... holy shit... don't stop...” Jackson echoed Chase's words from just a minute ago, his eyes squeezing shut. Days of tension were clenching his thighs and stomach and arms. His hands tightened in Chase's hair. Chase swiped his tongue and swirled and moaned, even swallowed his cock down...

Then, blissful blackness and climax. Jackson gasped, his arms and legs tensing with super-strength. He had an absolute focus on *Chase*, and every bit of how goddamn fucking incredibly *sexy* he was. His cock tasted incredible, his orgasms were the hottest to witness, and the way he moaned and whimpered uncontrollably when he came...

Chase swallowed hard with each squirt, his hand twisting around the base of Jackson's cock. He swiped his tongue under the head and sucked, bobbing his head just a little. When Jackson cracked his eyes, Chase was watching him with distant, hooded eyes and flushed cheeks. His bedhead hair was even more messy now with Jackson's hands carding through it.

Chase was stunning, and he didn't even know it. Jackson had the air sucked right out of his lungs as he desperately quivered those last few times.

The tension drained from him and Jackson let out long, deep sighs of pleasure. Chase licked him a few more times before pulling back.

They didn't say anything for a few moments. Chase drew himself up to kneel across Jackson's lap and kiss him.

Jackson didn't give a damn that they could taste each other. He just

wanted to crush Chase against him, hug him, and maybe sleep with him all day to recover from those mind-blowing climaxes.

“Nnnh,” Chase moaned quietly when Jackson's lips caressed his. Their bodies melted together in mutual pleasure.

Finally, Jackson pulled back for breath. “Christ, Chase. 69ing is supposed to be awkward, not the hottest thing I've ever done.”

Chase pulled back and laughed loudly, his cheeks still flushed with pleasure.

Jackson let his hand run down Chase's chest, his fingers tracing his tattoo across his pec and his bare stomach. He touched Chase's smooth, colorful arms as Chase rested against him.

Jackson pressed his face into Chase's neck and murmured, “We gotta shower before you get to work.”

“Oh, don't remind me of work,” Chase mumbled. “I was just planning round two.”

Jackson chuckled deeply and ran his hand down Chase's back to cup that cute little ass. “It'll give you more time to daydream about next time.”

“Mm. Perfect.” Chase finally peeled himself away from Jackson, reaching out to pull Jackson to his feet as well. They headed for the master bedroom shower.

Jackson's mind turned slowly over everything. There was the barbecue this weekend where he had to play nicely with the neighbors. Chase's ongoing situation where he couldn't just beat the crap out of his shitty uncle sucked, too. There was a lot to think about the fine balance they were walking between unhealthy habits and a possible new future...

Perhaps it was just the hormones flooding his whole body, but warmth burned in his bones long before he stepped into the shower. It was a glow of satisfaction; nothing bothered him so long as Chase was squeezing into his shower stall alongside him. Chase was still joking and flirting and Jackson's cheeks hurt from smiling.

This hadn't been a mistake at all.



## Chase

Morning shift week always sucked, but the first few mornings went surprisingly well. Chase still had that edge of tension every time the shop door rattled. He also knew he had the upper ground while he was at his own workplace.

On Wednesday, just before lunchtime, something prickled along the back of his neck. He jerked his head up sharply from his phone and pocketed it on instinct.

It wasn't a customer approaching the door, though. He'd know that silhouette anywhere.

The door rattled as Jerry entered. They locked eyes. Chase shuddered with anticipation as the words dripped from Jerry's lips.

"There you are."

Despite the shiver that ran down his spine, Chase stood tall this time. If his hands shook, his clenched fists hid it. "It's not hide and seek. I just don't want you talking to me."

"But *I'm* not done talking to you, young man."

He was eight again and he'd been caught taking the Lord's name in vain. Jerry was making him read Bible verses until his mouth was parched and he begged Father Williams for forgiveness.

He was thirteen and he'd been caught watching Matthew get changed at summer camp. Jerry was taking him behind the shed to slap him until he begged God for forgiveness.

He was reeling from coming out to his family. Jerry had taken him outside, reassuring his parents that he'd "deal with the situation" while wearing *that* look...

No. He wasn't.

"I don't care if you're not done," Chase snapped. "You don't own me anymore, and you never did."

"Where's the Charlie boy we once knew?" Chase wasn't fooled by the cadence of Jerry's voice for a second. He knew what his uncle was

capable of, and it wasn't happening again.

He was alone in the shop. Floyd wasn't due to join him until three, and Jackson was at work. It was just he and Jerry.

"We miss you. Luke misses you especially. He gave me a letter for you."

Jerry started to approach, but Chase held out a hand to make him stop. When Jerry did, Chase stood a little straighter. The gesture had worked.

"Drop it there. I'll pick it up later."

Jerry sneered, and *there* was that ugly mask he'd worn that day while trying to kick the gay out of Chase. Chase sneered right back in recognition.

Jerry's hand crumpled around the page, crushing it into a tight ball in his hand. He didn't look away for a second, letting Chase know that this was punishment. As always, Luke was his trump card – the ace he had up his sleeve to make Chase come crawling back.

This time, Chase wasn't rooted to the spot. In fact, he wanted to come around the counter and *punch* him. How dare he destroy his little brother's letter after trying to claim that he cared about him? It was fucking transparent now.

"It makes me sick that you keep trying to use Luke and Buddy to manipulate me," Chase snapped. He lowered his voice to make sure Jerry had to strain to hear him. "I love him a lot, and I hope things go well for him, if that's even possible. And I'll try to help him out of there, too, when he's eighteen and I can talk to him again."

"You think we're just going to let you go, son?"

"I'm not your son," Chase spat out. "And yeah, you *will* leave me alone. I work with a lot of needles, and at home, I've got more medieval sharp things around."

"What?"

Chase's hands shook, but he pulled himself away from the counter as if to step around it. "I'll defend myself this time, however I have to." Chase smiled bitterly and jutted his chin out. He knew what would fuck with Jerry's head. "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."

For the first time in his memory, Jerry looked unnerved enough to take a step back. Just one, but it was enough to bolster Chase's

confidence. His hands still shook, but his heart burned.

"How dare you?" Jerry whispered.

*Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.* Another quote from that same chapter filled Chase's mind. A Biblical verse was the last thing he'd expected to give him a sense of utter calm, but Chase wasn't questioning it.

The fear quelled away to nothing, and that left space for a shudder of rage to course through Chase. He wasn't frozen now; he was white-hot in anger. He *was* the metal freshly drawn from Jackson's forge.

"You're going to hell," Jerry breathed out, his voice a taunt and a threat, not a warning.

Rather than dread and anguish, Chase just felt bitter satisfaction. "Good. All the best people will be there, and hopefully you won't be. Or, if God is good, you will be. I can't *wait* to see you there."

Jerry's eyes narrowed in that hideous anger. Chase stood tall as he walked out from around the counter, his fists near his sides. "Get out. Don't ever, *ever* approach or communicate or talk to me again. The same goes for my parents so long as they blindly swallow what they're told. Tell Luke and Buddy I love them, if you have any shred of conscience left. And get... the *fuck*... out of Fredericton."

Jerry hauled back and Chase tensed. Rather than a fist, a wad of paper – Luke's letter – hit Chase's chest and bounced to the ground. Chase stood firm and didn't flinch.

He could never remember Jerry being the first to back down. Ever. And the way Jerry watched him... He saw him as a man now, not a kid in need of taming.

"You uttered a threat. I'll call the cops on you."

"Fine," Chase told him. "But not the ones here, because you're on your way out of town, right?" he taunted. "I don't care if you get the whole Ontario RCMP out looking for me, 'cause I'm not going back there for love nor money. I don't have anything there for me."

"Your family--"

"I don't have one," Chase told him, his voice harsher. Jerry recoiled again, and Chase jutted his chin out. "Now leave."

There were a few long seconds of silence. Jerry stepped back and gripped the door handle. "You can't take this back. Even if you repent,

you will never be welcome on the MacLeod doorstep again, Charles.”

“Good,” Chase told him, and he meant it. He might be shaking, his stomach might be sick from anxiety, but *he was free*. “Because I’m not a MacLeod, or a Charles, anymore. And I’m a better man for it, and a thousand times happier. I’m not there yet, but I’m getting better.”

And it was true. Chase’s chest swelled with pride in himself, for the first time he could remember. He *was* getting better. He was slowly working on it. And even drunk as a skunk, high off the music, fucking strangers in their backseats, he’d been far happier than he ever had been back there.

“Goodbye.” Jerry’s voice was empty as he turned his back and yanked open the shop door.

Chase kept his fists ready, just in case this was a feint, but there was a finality to Jerry’s voice. There was a complete shutdown in emotion and recognition that he’d never heard before. It was like Jerry was talking to a stranger, not his own nephew. “Goodbye.”

Jerry strode down the street without a backward glance.

For a long minute, Chase just stood there, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

All it had taken, all this time, was to threaten his uncle with a sword? Finally, he started to laugh at that bizarre fact – at how over-the-top it was, how fucking *weird* his life was. He sank into a waiting area chair, still laughing so hard he doubled over on his knees, tears stinging his eyes.

A sword. A fuckin’ sword. He’d threatened to fuckin’ *stab* his *uncle* with a medieval weapon he’d promised Jackson not to use! One he didn’t even *own* yet – that wasn’t even *forged* yet! And tattoo machine needles!

The hysterical laughter he couldn’t stop was the kind came with utter, absolute closure, with emotion he hardly knew how to process. He latched onto the weirdest thing he could think of – that goddamn sword – and laughed until he cried.

It took Chase a few minutes before he could breathe again, still doubled over on his knees.

“He who has lost his life for my sake will find it.” He licked his lips as he straightened up, then tried to dismiss the verses from his head.

Finally, his eyes were drawn to the wad of paper on the floor. He

forced himself to get up and scoop up the paper, and walked over to the counter to smooth it out.

It wasn't a letter at all, but a crayon drawing, slightly better than stick figures but not advanced yet. One man had too-long arms and legs and colorful scrawls across them. The other figure next to him was shorter and had curly black hair – just like Luke always drew himself. They both smiled.

Chase's eyes were drawn to the backdrop, and their family church standing in the background. The cross on the roof overshadowed the rest of the drawing.

“Oh, Luke,” he murmured, rubbing a thumb along the lines. “Church isn't the only road to salvation.” His brother was young; he had years to learn that. Chase prayed he'd be able to find some way to help him along in the next eight years, before he was free from their family.

Chase bit his lip hard and folded the page, tucking it into his pocket. He could see customers approaching from across the street, and he had to be normal. Somewhat normal. At least he wasn't distraught like he'd once thought he would be in this moment.

He was just... empty.

If this was a victory, why did it feel so much like losing?

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By the time the customers were gone, Chase's heart rate had steadied and he felt almost dizzy. The stress of the last few days was gone. Instead of relief, it left him feeling anxious. It was like he needed something to worry about instead.

He pulled out his phone to send Jackson a text.

*Jerry came in & I talked to him. He should leave me alone now.*

Jackson's response came before he could even put his phone away.

*I'll pick you up after work. 5?*

Chase smiled to himself. Jackson was worried for his safety, but he didn't have to be. Chase had this weird feeling that... that was it. Jerry had never sounded so final.

*Yep 5. OK.*

He went to tuck his phone away again and his finger brushed a sharp

corner in his pocket. When he pulled out the business card, his eyebrows raised.

He needed to do laundry. But more than that, this must have been the pair of jeans he was wearing the day Alex had come in to confess what he'd done.

And suddenly, Chase had an idea what he could do for him.

Alex picked up right away. "Hello?"

"This is Chase. About that favor..."

Alex rustled in the background and paid attention. "Yes?"

"My uncle, Jerry MacLeod, came to find me. Make sure he's left town for good, and that nobody else is coming."

"Okay, I can do that." Alex was already typing in the background. "Er, Chase?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you for letting me help out. I... This is the least I can do."

"I'm not here to appease your conscience," Chase muttered. It was more grumpy than truly bitter. Alex *had* been doing his job; it was just kind of an asshole job. "Just tell me if they're gone for good."

"I'll come see you this weekend – sooner if I find out that they're around."

"Okay. Bye."

Chase tucked his phone and the business card in his pocket next to the drawing and leaned heavily on the counter. It was odd not to have that fear in the back of his mind – the sickening worry that *someone* would come for him someday. Jerry was gone, Will wasn't the stalking type, and the rest of his family sounded like they were gone now, too.

He had nothing to run from. All he could do was move forward.

Maybe he'd go out for supper with Jackson tonight and treat *him* this time. Chase smiled, nibbling his thumbnail absently. Jackson might like that. Either way, he'd make Jackson let him pay. It was really the least he could do.

## Jackson

“Hey, good-looking.”

“Hi,” Chase grinned. The tattoo shop door swung shut behind him and he joined Jackson on the sidewalk. He slipped his hand into Jackson's and stretched up to kiss him.

Jackson loved that he was a couple inches shorter. Not short enough to be a hassle, but short enough that he could stretch up on his toes and tease Chase. He could make him work for a kiss now and then.

Not today, though. He wanted everything to come easy to Chase after the kind of day he'd had.

“Feel like going out for a meal?” Chase asked.

“Oh. Sure,” Jackson nodded. He hadn't expected Chase to be up for going out, but then, he had no idea how that confrontation had gone earlier. “Where?”

“The fancy new place down the street?”

Jackson nodded. “What's the occasion? Other than... you know.” *Do I ask about it yet?*

“Being free,” Chase said. He took Jackson's hand and led him down the street. “How was your day?”

“Nowhere near as eventful as yours... as usual,” Jackson chuckled. “It never seems to be. Er, there was an argument with a builder, but the paperwork's on my side so we settled it quickly.”

“Over what?”

Jackson grimaced. “Money. It always gets ugly around that. I've never had trouble with him before, but I think he's getting forgetful... He wanted to pay me half what he agreed on upfront and the rest later, but I have bills from my suppliers to pay, too.”

Chase frowned and squeezed his hand. “Yeah. And you took care of it?”

“Yep.” Jackson bumped his hip lightly against Chase's to make him

smile. "He remembered when we went over the paperwork we did last year for his first order and apologized a lot."

"Good." Chase laced his fingers with Jackson's. "So I might as well tell you how it went down..."

"If you want," Jackson nodded. "Not if it'll stress you out again, though."

When Chase looked at him, Jackson spotted something a little different in his eyes. His mood was light and cheery again. God, it had been weeks since he'd seen Chase look this carefree – if he *ever* had. "It won't stress me out."

"No? Okay. You look... good."

Chase smiled. "Thanks. So, Jerry came in and told me he wanted to talk to me, and I said he's not allowed to anymore. He gave me a note from my brother and I pretty much told him I'm out of the family for good. Or he told me. Either way, we agreed on that much."

Jackson couldn't imagine being told that and still being able to smile. Chase's family was so different. *Shitty*, he wanted to think. He winced and nodded.

"I got a little more Biblical than that on him, but it worked. I really think he's gone for good now."

Jackson nodded. "And that's what you wanted?"

Chase was silent for a minute as they walked – long enough that Jackson started to question whether he'd heard. Before he could repeat it, Chase swung their hands lightly and nodded. "I think so."

Jackson paused at the crosswalk when the green walking man turned red and leaned in to kiss Chase's lips in a little peck. "Okay."

Chase leaned into him and smiled, kissing him back before murmuring, "Thanks for asking."

"You wanna dance after dinner? Have a drink?" Jackson suggested. He could help Chase make this a celebration.

Chase lit up with a smile, those beautiful white teeth flashing as his eyes brightened. The light turned green. They pulled away from each other, still holding hands, to start walking. "Yeah. That sounds great."

"Okay, it's on," Jackson smiled, swinging their hands lightly. "Oh, there's the restaurant."



They didn't discuss Chase's family again. Instead, Jackson asked Chase about his clients that day, what tattoos he was drawing or planning, and about his fencing classes. Chase even managed to sneak to the bar and pay before Jackson could even ask for the bill.

After supper, they ambled back down the street to the gay club. Chase stood tall as he led Jackson inside and paid their cover.

Chase and Jackson stood at one of a few small tables around the edge of the dance floor to watch people for a bit. They had to stand close together to hear each other, but Jackson wasn't complaining. He liked having an arm around Chase's shoulders anyway, and Chase seemed to find it amusing.

"Have you been here a lot?" Chase asked, turning his lips to Jackson's ear.

Jackson shook his head. "Not in months. Maybe a year...?"

Chase's eyebrows shot up. "Ah. Wow."

"I'm not sure I remember how to dance," Jackson laughed.

Chase winked and sidled closer to kiss his jaw. "I'll remind you."

Jackson finished his drink and waited for Chase to finish his. He led him to the dance floor to sidle close under the lights, his arms around Chase's waist.

They spent hours on the dance floor without having another drink, just losing themselves in movement and music. They could grind and dance dirty for some songs and act silly other times without judgment. If they were being judged, neither of them noticed or cared.

Only when Jackson's feet started to hurt did he nudge Chase, leaning down to his ear. "You wanna go home?"

"I've been waiting for you to ask for hours," Chase teased, kissing his neck and slinging an arm around his shoulders. They tried to slip through the small crowd in the even smaller club. At coat check, Chase gave a startled glance to a tall, curly-haired man nearby.

"Oh, hi."

"Hello..." The stranger eyed Jackson for a moment before looking back at Chase. "How are you?"

"Good," Chase answered, leaning on the counter and handing over his ticket to the attendant. "You? Settling in well?"

“Yes, thank you.” He sounded Italian.

Chase waved between them. “Antonio, this is my boyfriend Jackson. Jackson, Antonio.”

Antonio gave Chase another moment's surprised glance. He smiled at Jackson and reaching out to awkwardly shake hands.

Another man slipped in beside them and rested a hand on Antonio's shoulder. He was short and round and had an adorable smile and a bright pink shirt. He was the kind of gay man Jackson saw coming from across the city, let alone the room. “Got our coats, Tony?”

“They found yours without trouble. Mine is less distinctive.”

Jackson grinned at the bright purple jacket that Antonio handed over to the newcomer. He glanced at Chase, who was smiling without a hint of discomfort.

“Here you are. Sorry for the wait.” The attendant handed over Antonio's coat first, then Chase's and Jackson's.

Chase slid a bill into the jar and nodded. “See you around, I'm sure,” he told Antonio with a wave, then nodded at Antonio's partner.

“Bye,” Antonio bade them, and Jackson followed his lover out to the street.

“Who were they?” Jackson asked.

Chase just smiled at him, buttoning up his jacket before taking Jackson's hand again. “Doesn't matter anymore. Let's go home.”

Jackson was happy to fulfill Chase's request.

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“Oh man, I'm gonna hurt tomorrow,” Chase lamented. “I haven't been there in... *weeks* now.”

“Weeks?” Jackson laughed, slipping his shirt off and tossing it into the laundry basket. “What, like a week or two? Try months and months. Years.”

“It's not my fault you're antisocial,” Chase smirked.

Jackson laughed. “I'm not, you know that. I'm just... anti-stranger-social.”

“True. That's different,” Chase agreed. He tossed his own clothes in

the basket. As he turned his back to approach the bed, Jackson stared. Somehow, he hadn't seen Chase's bare back before.

“Oh...”

Chase paused and looked over his shoulder, holding still so Jackson could look. “Yeah?”

A gnarled tree ran up one side of his back, across his shoulder blade, its branches stretching up toward his shoulder and neck. The leaves were thick, starting in pale pastels and brightening up toward the top of the tree. A kite, caught in the uppermost branches amongst the balloons, stretched up toward his opposite shoulder. In script was written, *Kites rise highest against the wind.*

“That's beautiful,” Jackson murmured, rubbing his thumb along the tree trunk and up toward the kite. “When did you get that done?”

“When I first left home.” Chase twisted to glance over his opposite shoulder instead. “Thank you.”

Jackson leaned in to press his lips against Chase's.

Chase moaned quietly and leaned back into Jackson, his body warm against Jackson's. He fit perfectly against him, all slender and firm where Jackson was muscled. The bright colors and black tattoos streaked across his skin were works of art on an already beautiful body.

“It's perfect,” Jackson murmured, rubbing Chase's chest now.

“Can we shower together? I'd like that, after... today.”

Jackson let out a quiet breath of relief and nodded. “Okay.” He trusted Chase to know what he needed, and if that was warmth and closeness...

Jackson wrapped his hands around Chase's backside to pick him up and carry him the few steps toward the master bathroom. Chase laughed with surprise and Jackson winked, easing him to his feet on the bathroom tiles.

“What a romantic,” Chase teased, his eyes aglow from the hours of dancing and flirting. Jackson wanted to show his... love.

Oh, it was way too soon for that. Jackson's heart thrummed with nerves, though he knew it was true.

“You're gonna make me wait to make love to me, right?” Chase murmured after a few moments, stepping into Jackson's shower.

“Patience is a virtue.”

Chase snorted. “Thanks. I’ll be the most virtuous little fag you’ve ever had.”

*That* was an interesting word choice. Jackson flinched on pure instinct, glancing at Chase. He was grinning. Jackson brushed it aside for now and laughed. “You’re a little demanding.”

“I know what I want,” Chase countered. He turned on the hot water and shivered, stepping out of the way until it warmed up. “But... yeah, maybe not tonight.”

“Not tonight,” Jackson echoed. He followed Chase into the shower, pressing a kiss to the back of Chase’s neck.

Chase shifted and sighed with satisfaction, his body melting against Jackson’s. “You could give me the old reach-around...” His tone sounded teasing, though. He was joking.

Jackson’s laugh bubbled from his throat. “Oh, you,” he murmured, flicking Chase’s shoulder as the hot water streamed down their bodies.

“I’m glad you don’t find me... too much.”

“Never,” Jackson promised, rubbing Chase’s chest.

They were quiet for a minute before Jackson let go. “Here’s the soap.”

“I’m... I’m really happy,” Chase admitted, taking the soap and scrubbing himself off. “Christ, you were right with what you said the other day. But this felt different. I’m *choosing* this. This isn’t... proving anything, you know?”

Jackson smiled, ducking his head under the water to wet his hair. “I’m so proud of you,” he murmured. He ran his hand across Chase’s shoulder.

Chase was changing before his very eyes. Even that moment of self-awareness seemed to have made him conscious of his own boundaries.

This was a different Chase than the one who had seduced him in his workshop, but it was one Jackson loved no less.

“Thanks,” Chase chuckled quietly.

He barely remembered drifting off a few minutes later, wrapping up the clean, soapy-smelling man in his arms and against his front. As he went to sleep, he had one image stuck in his head: Chase looking back with a smile as Jackson’s soapy hands ran over the bright leaves at the

top of the tattooed tree.

## Chase

*Turn in notice.*

Chase glanced at the alarm that flashed across his phone screen. He shut it off and sighed, glad he'd set it earlier that week. It was crunch time: if he wanted to break his lease, it was near the end of August. He'd have better luck if the landlord could quickly pick up a student around September first.

He rubbed a hand over his mouth, glancing out toward the workshop in the backyard. It was great to have Friday off, but Jackson had a project he had to finish by the end of the week. Chase was hanging out in the house while he smithed.

It was nearly noon. Chase was in the middle of making KD and Spam – the only meal he knew how to make that wasn't out of the same package. He figured combining two packaged foods made it a little fancier, at least.

“Kraft Dinner?” was Jackson's greeting as he stepped through the back door, grinning at the distinctive bright blue box on the counter.

“Shh, don't ruin the surprise!” Chase scolded.

“Oh, and ham – nice one.” Jackson beamed and came over to kiss him. “For me?”

“No, for me. All for me. I'll eat the whole pot... with a spoon.”

Jackson's laugh boomed through the kitchen. He let go and grabbed bowls and forks for them. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome.” Chase drained the pasta and dumped it back in the pot, adding the butter, milk, and cheese packet. The ham was already cut up and went in next. “It's the only thing I really know how to make...”

“No...” Jackson groaned. “Mac and cheese and ham? Really?”

“Really,” Chase blushed. “I always lived off... um, this, and Hamburger Helper, and Sidekicks, and...”

“Jesus, no, no,” Jackson held out a hand. “Not under my roof. I can

teach you proper cooking.”

Chase held his breath, dumping macaroni into each bowl. “Actually... I wanted to talk to you about that.” He carried their bowls to the table and settled down opposite Jackson, trying to be casual and not anxious about the conversation. “I gotta turn in my notice soon if I’m moving out, so the landlord can find a good student...”

Jackson nodded. “Are you thinking about it?”

“Um. I don’t know,” Chase admitted. “It’s weird with the way we haven’t dated long...”

“Mmhmm?” Jackson was quite neutral as he listened, not showing what he thought yet.

“But now that we’re living together, I really, really like this,” Chase confessed. He laughed. “How long-term is this?”

“This meaning you living here, or us dating? Or both?”

Chase licked his lips. “Both.” He hadn’t even eaten a bite of KD yet. He realized he was still holding his fork in the air.

Jackson put down his fork and reached across the table to take Chase’s hand. Chase quickly put his fork on the table, too. “Chase: if you would move in with me, I’d be delighted to have you,” he said seriously.

Chase didn’t have words for the way his heart nearly burst out of his chest. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Jackson laughed quietly. “If you’re worried about being independent, I can convert the walkout basement suite so it feels more like we’re dating – whatever it takes. But it’s your decision. We’ll keep dating either way. I’m in this for the long-term if it works out and you want to be, too.”

Chase let out a breath. “I was hoping you’d say that,” he admitted. “I want to stay.”

Jackson stood up and pulled him to his feet to kiss him. Chase was only too happy to lean into Jackson to enjoy the moment.

Chase sat back down again. “Eat up.”

Jackson chuckled fondly and settled down again for lunch. They didn’t say much over their bowls of macaroni, but Chase caught Jackson giving him sneaky, affectionate glances.

Finally, Chase laughed when their bowls were clean. "I'll wash up," he told him, standing up and gathering their dishes. "You get back out to work."

Jackson looked surprised. "Not going to suggest a celebration of our news?"

"There's lots of time for sex later," Chase told Jackson. The moment the words left his lips, even *his* jaw dropped a little. He shook his head. "Go on, get out. Sooner you finish work, sooner you're back inside, and we'll see," he winked. "I'm going out shopping with Noah for barbecue food though."

"Right, that's tomorrow," Jackson groaned, plodding toward the back door. "I'll have to clean off the barbecue."

"You say that like it's a chore. I see you patting it on your way to the workshop."

Jackson turned red and pretended not to hear him as he stepped outside and slid the back door shut after him.

Chase laughed under his breath, leaning against the counter to have a good look around his new home. He still had to deal with the landlord, but he was positive he could work something out. If all else failed, he could sublet.

He'd do whatever it took to stay with Jackson, but this time, not because he had nowhere else to go and he was afraid of being found. This time, he wasn't running *away*. Since confronting his uncle, Chase hadn't even had a crying attack in the shower, or a dark night with too much vodka. He was stunned at how *easy* it had been. He'd done his grieving a long time ago. Now, he was running into Jackson's arms, and Jackson was reaching out to pull him close at every turn.

Jackson was everything he wanted his home to be.

---

"So, what's the new exhibition about? And twenty hamburgers?"

"Make it two boxes." Noah held the freezer door for Chase as he grabbed boxes of frozen hamburger patties. "The exhibit's all tiny art."

Chase hummed. For a show put on by some pretentious rich guy, that actually sounded interesting. "Cool. Why tiny art, though? Not, like, *world peace* or *beauty*?"



Noah leaned in and lowered his voice. Grocery stores were a prime spot for overhearing gossip, after all. "I think the guy thinks he can buy a lot of it for the same amount as a few large paintings and impress people..."

"Oh," Chase laughed, setting the boxes in the cart. "Did you try explaining--"

"That size doesn't dictate price?" Noah smirked. "That can apply in so many situations. But yes," he lisped, letting the door swing shut and flourishing as he turned on his heel to follow Chase.

Chase snorted. "Funny." He wheeled the cart along. "What veggies do we need?"

"Fresh veggies are better on the barbecue. We'll go back there." Noah checked his list, then dangled it between two fingers and sauntered along next to Chase.

Even Chase was surprised at how at ease he felt around Noah. He still didn't quite know how to respond sometimes, but Noah made him laugh instead of cringe more often now. "Okay. What do they like making most?"

"Asparagus, green beans, corn... the usual. Thomas is a fiend for corn. He'll eat it all if you let him."

"Good to know," Chase chuckled. "You must like being around them a lot."

Noah nodded. "Oh, yeah. I'm moving in soon." He glanced at Chase. "You are, too, huh?"

"It... it's way sooner than you and Cam, but yeah," Chase admitted. "It was supposed to be temporary, but I like living with him. And I like the family atmosphere."

"Yeah." Noah started choosing corncobs, squeezing them and peeking under the layers of leaves. "It gets a little lonely here sometimes. Or it did before I met them. Now I have this huge, weird circle of friends from each of them and from my own hobbies..."

Chase laughed. "Yeah? You don't have family here?"

"No. They haven't been out to see me yet, either," Noah shook his head. "But I'm hoping to see them at Christmas or something. We've never been super-close. We're the type to visit once or twice a year and maybe call on special occasions, but otherwise leave me alone."

"That sounds okay," Chase nodded. "The opposite of these guys,

though.”

“Very opposite.” Noah frowned as he stuffed corn into a bag, then chose another. “Help me pick corn.”

Chase abandoned the cart and grabbed a plastic bag to start choosing corncobs as Noah showed him how. “I don't have one, so I'm kind of looking forward to getting involved with the Rileys more,” he admitted.

Noah gave him a quick glance and smiled. “Yeah? They're super-nice, even his parents. It's just small-town manners. It's really easy to get to know people. I kinda wish my family were more in touch, though... I drove them away a little, you know?”

Chase nodded. He wasn't sure what to think of Noah confiding in him so easily, but again, he tried hard not to judge him. After all, Noah seemed to be trusting him like a new family member, and being treated that way was a relief. He kept his voice down out of respect for Noah's privacy. “If you want them to talk more, try encouraging them. Maybe they just think you want more distance than you want anymore.”

“Mmm.” Noah gave him a thoughtful glance. “Wise.”

Chase cracked a smile. “Thanks. This enough corn?”

“It should be.” Noah squeezed his shoulder. “Come on, let's go get green beans next.”

Chase took charge of the cart and followed after Noah, smiling to himself at Noah's retreating back. Maybe Noah was loudly colorful, the type for whom the closet was never an option, but he seemed sweet.

This was his new life: grocery shopping and barbecues, bringing lunch to Jackson when he was off while Jackson brought him lunch on his work days. And getting to know a whole new family on top of that... It was overwhelming, but every fiber in Chase's body told him he was on the right track.

## Jackson

"Cathy and Don? Great to meet you," Jackson smiled, pumping their hands. "You live next door, huh? Sorry for my brothers' ugly mugs."

Cathy laughed and accepted the hamburger he handed over. "Thank you. It's nice to see some more life in this neighborhood. We haven't been a tightly-knit neighborhood in so long."

"Yeah?" Jackson frowned, stepping back from the grill for a moment once he gave Don a burger, too. "I don't know much about the neighborhood. I lived on the other side of downtown for a while, but not over here."

"Oh, it used to be a little closer. Since the suburbs started growing, a lot of families have moved there. Downtown is full of students now, not so many young families."

Jackson nodded. "But this is the best place to raise a family, right in walking distance of everything."

"Exactly," Don agreed. He was a heavysset, graying man with a small beard. He licked the ketchup off his fingers. "It was wonderful for our family. When our sons moved out, we decided to stay here because we knew the area, if not the people."

"If only we'd had these barbecues at the start of the summer," Cathy shook her head.

"Next summer," Jackson promised firmly. "We're planning on redoing the yards until the snow falls. As soon as the ground thaws in the spring. It might look very different by next time you're over! But you can come over anytime if you need anything," he added. "To any of my brothers'."

"Thank you. You, too – I hate running out of things while baking," Don laughed.

"So you're all brothers?" Cathy added. "You're the one with the forge?"

"Ah, you know about the forge," Jackson grinned. "Hard to miss, I suppose. I am. I'm the oldest. My brother Cam there's a beekeeper, in

semi-retirement until he has surgery in December. And that's Thomas, my little brother. He works at a bank."

"Are you all seeing anyone?"

The way Cathy asked, Jackson was certain they already knew the answer. Nosy damn neighbors. He kept a lid on his first response, reminding himself that a hot temper wasn't the best way to make friends. "Yes. My boyfriend there is Chase, the one with the tattoos." He had his sleeves rolled up and he was making another bowl of salad under Noah's directions. "And Noah, next to him, is Cam's boyfriend."

"Thomas isn't, then?"

"Not yet." Jackson laughed. "We've both started dating since moving in here, though, so there must be something in the air. Many young singles here, or mostly couples and families?" At the barbecue, it was an even mix of people. Some young professionals, a couple pairs of roommates, two families, and some older couples.

At least nobody had been too weirded out by them. Canada was nice sometimes, especially small towns. Jackson thought they got a bad rap sometimes, but sometimes they were the best places. Sometimes people didn't judge you, or they'd known you since you were a kid. His old math teacher turned out to be living quite close and had dropped by earlier.

All four of the others – Cam, Thomas, Noah, and Chase – kept glancing at him as he talked with Don and Cathy. He got the feeling *something* was up. Eventually, he excused himself under the pretext of asking them to run inside for more meat.

"What are those looks for?" he asked, leaning between Noah and Chase.

Noah glanced at Cam, who returned the glance.

"Okay, spill."

"Uh," Cam spoke up, clearing his throat. "A week or two back, *someone* called the cops for a noise disturbance. And complained about the wood smoke."

Jackson's eyebrows shot up and he heated up. "But the regulations--" He tugged at his collar.

"I know," Noah assured him. "That's what we told him – he agreed and left us alone. But we don't really want people asking the city to come investigate. It'd just be a pain in your ass..."

“What, you thought I'd bite their heads off if I knew?” Jackson rolled his eyes. Probably true, but still.

“Uh...” Cam swapped glances with Thomas, both trying not to laugh.

Jackson snorted. “Fair point. I'll play nice. More burgers, please.”

“On it,” Chase told him. He pecked his cheek and ducked away to head inside.

When Jackson returned to the grill, Don and Cathy were still standing nearby. Jackson forced himself to smile again. *The bastards, calling the cops on me. I clearly had contractors do the work specifically so it would be up to code. And I don't run the forge out of hours, and I even dampened my damn anvil...*

“So, do you do railings?” Don asked.

Jackson resisted the urge to groan. *No more fucking railings.* “I've done a lot of them, yeah.”

“We need our back porch railings done...”

Jackson glanced back at Cam, who was nodding to him. Well, it was a small price to pay for peace on the street. He looked back at Cathy and Don and nodded. “I'm sure we can work something out at a 'friends and neighbors' rate. I'll have to come see the railings to write down the specs.”

“Anytime. How about next weekend? We can have you and your, er, boyfriend – Chase, was it? Have you two over for a barbecue before the weather turns. Our son will be visiting that week. I'm sure he'd like to meet someone his age who's... who shares certain things more in common with him.”

Jackson quirked his eyebrow. *If he's gay, just say it.* “You mean...?”

“He, er, came out to us a few years ago,” Cathy nodded.

Jackson smiled. “Oh. Cool. How old is he? I don't think I know him.” It was more pleasant than he expected to talk to these two, especially since finding out they knew someone else he had “more in common” with. It turned out their son was a little younger than him and had gone to the French school, not the one he had. That explained why he didn't know him.

He was out of burgers, though. Where the hell was Chase?

When Jackson turned to find him, he saw Chase chatting to a handsome man with dark stubble and piercing eyes. They were

squared off, but Chase seemed to be getting on fine.

Jackson laughed under his breath. Chase had been skittish even as recently as the art exhibition, sticking to the walls and forcing Jackson to approach him to talk. He was blooming quickly now, socializing with everyone. He got along even better with Noah and his brothers now.

Chase looked up and caught his gaze, and Jackson pointed to the grill. Chase laughed and said something to the man, who cast a quick glance around the party. Chase came over to bring him his burgers, and Thomas approached the newcomer instead. "Sorry. I got distracted."

"You're a social butterfly," Jackson teased, sliding the burgers onto the grill one at a time. He took the plate from Chase's hands and pecked his lips. "You'll be proud of me. I'm doing railings for Cathy and Don."

Chase couldn't clap his hand over his mouth in time to hide his snort. "More railings? I'm sorry." He looked mostly amused, though.

"And I didn't even take any cheap shots about calling the cops for stupid petty things."

"Good." Chase patted his arm. "It's too nice a day to get into that."

"How did you know about them doing that, anyway?"

Chase shrugged. "Uh, I was chatting with Cam and Thomas and Noah earlier."

"You getting on fine?"

"Stop worrying about me," Chase teased, straightening out Jackson's collar. "I'm getting along with your family just fine."

Jackson blushed and swatted Chase away. His collar had been just fine. "I'm not *worrying*. I'm just checking in."

"Mmhmm," Chase winked. "I appreciate you 'checking in' on me." He took the plate again to bring it inside.

Jackson smiled. When he looked back at the stranger Thomas had been talking to, he was gone. Two new people were approaching him, though. "Hello! I'm Jackson Riley."

Life was good. No, life was fucking *great*.

---

“Ohhh, god,” Thomas groaned, expressing all of their feelings. He stooped to gather up the last few napkins and scoop them into the bag.

They'd only just shooed the last few neighbors back to their homes. It was dark – which, in August, meant it was late at night. The beer was gone and the barbecue had used a tank of propane. Don had brought over a portable stereo system to play music throughout the evening. Jackson had even resisted quipping about noise ordinances. Chase had had to elbow him hard when it had nearly slipped out once, though.

All in all, the neighborhood block party had been a stunning success. Everyone was talking about the next event. Something this big, with every house on the block, could only happen every few months. They'd promised to try to arrange some kind of potluck for Christmas, though.

“They only interrogated me *every other minute* about why you two have boyfriends and I don't,” Thomas rolled his eyes.

“So, why don't you have a boyfriend, Thomas?” Cam smirked. “Or a nice lady friend?”

“Yeah, Thomas. Why don't you?” Jackson chimed in.

“Lady friend,” Thomas groaned, tossing the bag of recyclables aside. “If I hear that phrase one more time...”

Noah and Chase were inside washing dishes. With just the brothers, Jackson felt a little freer to ask. “So, seriously...”

Thomas sighed and leaned on the table. “No, I'm not seeing anyone.”

“Well, if we're teasing you too much, just tell us to fuck off,” Cam shrugged. “Or if you're asexual, or aromantic, or both. Or quirkyalone. Or--”

“Or a celibate who wants to abandon us all and live in a monastery,” Jackson added. “Read books all day long.”

“No,” Thomas laughed. “I'm not any of those things. I just... don't have someone.”

Jackson winked. “Maybe you're next.” He closed the barbecue lid. “Love is in the air...”

Thomas was blushing and shaking his head, but he didn't say anything.

“Oh?” Cam pressed, noticing the same thing. “Is there someone you're

interested in?"

Thomas waved a hand at them both. "You're nosy bastards."

"You *know* we are," Jackson agreed. "Who is it? Is it that guy I saw you talking to earlier? Or... Or someone at the bank? Someone you met here at the barbecue?"

Thomas sighed, looking vaguely irritated but still smiling. "It's someone I've been turning down for a while now. I don't want to say who it is yet. But I might not be turning down the next date."

Jackson caught his breath and punched Thomas's shoulder lightly. "You go," he grinned. "See? I knew there was something going on."

"But no interfering or spying." Thomas waved his finger at them both, just like he was little again and lecturing both of his big brothers while they played school with him. They'd always thought he'd wind up a teacher, but a steady bank job had attracted him.

"No interference," Cam smiled. "So, Sunday breakfast tomorrow?"

"Okay," Jackson nodded. "Whose place?"

"Mine," Cam offered. "Noah's got this killer pancake recipe he just found. It's actually really good."

Thomas nodded and raised a hand to wave to them both. "See you tomorrow morning."

As he left, Cam and Jackson swapped *told you so* grins. "See you," Cam echoed his little brother and followed Thomas and walked beyond, through to his own yard.

Noah had already headed into Cam's house, leaving Chase in Jackson's. Chase was wiping down the counters and tidying up the kitchen. Jackson smiled, standing there for a few moments. Chase's lips moved as he sang something and moved in time to his own unheard beat.



## Thomas

No way. He'd just told his brothers that he was probably going to see someone, breaking a roughly ten-year streak of silence around his love life.

This was the beginning of the end of his stupid self-imposed secrecy, and Thomas wasn't sure how to feel.

He couldn't be *too* vocal yet, though. There was one huge problem. If they found out *who* he was probably going to let take him on a date, they were gonna be pissed off. And frankly, Thomas was pretty pissed off himself.

Still, he pulled out his phone the moment it rang, then waited a couple rings so as not to seem eager before picking up. "Hello?"

Thomas would know that number and the sexy rumbling voice anywhere. "Thomas? Hi." The way the name rolled off his tongue made Thomas shudder.

"Still can't believe I gave you my number," Thomas grumbled, playing it cool as he closed the blinds across his back door. "But go on, ask again."

"Can I see you?"

Thomas paused for a few long moments, his eyes sliding closed. He leaned on the kitchen counter, drawing out the silence for a few long moments just to make him sweat.

"Okay. You can come over now."

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

Thomas hung up and pressed his phone to his lips. He shook his head. It was a stupid move, but maybe his brothers were right.

Maybe there *was* something in the air. Jackson was the happiest he'd seen him around Chase. Cam and Noah were practically engaged.

He had to take a step – whether forward or backward, he didn't yet know. Either way, he felt emboldened by coming at least a little bit clean. It was his turn, and there was no better time than now.

Chase

“Hey, sexy.”

The patio door slid open and Jackson stepped inside. Chase put down his cloth and beamed at Jackson. “Oh, hello. I just finished the dishes. All tidy outside?”

Jackson smiled fondly. He kicked off his shoes, then walked over to kiss the top of Chase's head, wrapping one strong arm around his shoulders. “Yep. Thank you for helping clean up.”

“No problem.”

“You're happy,” Jackson remarked. “Had a good time today?”

Chase nodded. The barbecue itself had been much more fun than he'd thought, and he still had a little energy. Plus... “I just found out that my uncle and family are definitely gone for good.”

Jackson's eyes flickered, and he pulled back to watch Chase's face. He looked a bit worried and uncertain how to address that topic.

Chase snaked his arm around Jackson's waist and leaned in to kiss him. “Don't be sad. I'm glad. I already made my peace a long time ago.”

“Okay,” Jackson murmured. “If you ever need to talk about it...”

Chase chuckled. He didn't have anything more to say about it: it was the last needle in his kit sliding perfectly into the box. It wasn't the dramatic, heart-wrenching conclusion to their family drama he'd always envisioned. It was just the quiet satisfaction of completion. “I think I'll be all right.”

“Okay.” Jackson wrapped his other arm around Chase, too, and pulled him for a quick, tight hug. “Want to go to bed? I'm beat.”

“God, yes,” Chase laughed. “You've been looking so hot all day, manning the barbecue...”

Jackson grinned, pulling away from Chase and taking his hand to lead him upstairs. “Have I? Do you like a man with tongs in his hand?”

“Oh, yeah. Except dentists,” Chase shivered. “Those aren't sexy tongs...”

Jackson snorted with laughter. “I promise not to become a dentist.”

“Good.”

Chase pulled Jackson into his bedroom and kicked the door shut. He walked backward toward the bed, his hands on Jackson's waist. “You should make love to me again.”

Jackson's eyebrows flickered up. He walked forward as he was pulled along, his hands rising to cup Chase's cheeks. He pressed a kiss to Chase's lips and pushed him backward.

The adrenaline rush of falling through the air only halfway subsided when Chase hit the bed. He moaned his appreciation, grabbing Jackson by the belt loops and jerking to haul him down on top of him.

“Jesus, you're strong,” Jackson laughed.

Chase winked. “Stronger than I look, which isn't hard.”

Jackson grinned and kissed Chase again, nestling between his legs. They met each other's lips in teasing, gentle kisses, sometimes pulling away to make the other man work for it. The way Jackson smiled made Chase's heart flutter every time.

Finally, Chase grabbed Jackson's back and hip and squirmed under him, trying to get leverage to flip him over.

“What are you-- Oh.” Jackson let Chase roll him onto his back, flipping their positions. “Hello, there.”

Chase laughed. “Hi.” He knelt back, one hand on Jackson's shoulder, and looked Jackson up and down. “You're even hotter from this angle.” Jackson's gray t-shirt clung to each curve of his pecs and stretched around his biceps. It had slid up just enough that he could see Jackson's treasure trail across his stomach.

“Thanks,” Jackson chuckled quietly. He tugged at Chase's shirt before he started unbuttoning it.

Chase gladly shrugged it off and tossed it aside. He grabbed the hem of Jackson's t-shirt to pull it off. “Mm...” He leaned down to press open-mouthed kisses along Jackson's collarbone, shoulder, and chest. His pecs were so fuckin' firm, Chase just wanted to lick them forever.

Jackson shuddered, his fingers curling into Chase's thigh. Encouraged by this sign, Chase mouthed at his nipple. He circled his tongue

around the stiff nub as Jackson's chest heaved.

"Nnh... Chase," Jackson whispered, his voice hoarse. Chase kissed over to his other nipple and Jackson groaned, "Oh, yeah."

Chase smirked, then scooted down the bed, wriggling his way down. He took his time kissing across his stomach and chest. When he reached that beautiful V etched into Jackson's body, he kissed down along his hipbone. He went down along one side of the V to the waistband, then back up the other side.

Jackson was hard by now, straining against his jeans. He kneaded Chase's shoulders to keep himself calm. Chase loved driving him wild with just his lips.

"What have we here?" Chase teased, unbuttoning his jeans and drawing the zipper down. He hauled down the fabric and caught his fingers in the waistband at the same time to pull everything down. He scooted down with the fabric, then awkwardly shoved it down to Jackson's shins so Jackson could kick off the layers of fabric.

"A hell of a boner for you," Jackson answered frankly.

Chase laughed richly, unable to help the grin stretching across his cheeks. "What a compliment."

*It was* a hell of a boner for him, though. Jackson's cock was twitching, bobbing in the air above his stomach. It looked as huge and delicious as always. It felt like so long since Chase got to suck it last.

Chase licked his lips and ran his hand down across Jackson's chest and stomach while mouthing at the base of the erection.

Jackson stifled his grunt, and Chase lipped his way up along the shaft to the head. Chase wrapped his hand around the base of Jackson's shaft and pulled it up to stroke. When he pushed his hand down to the base, his mouth slipped around the head and down the shaft. His lips curled between his teeth and sensitive skin, tongue darting along the salty skin.

"Hnngh!" Jackson moaned, his back arching for a moment before he settled again. "Oh, *yeah*, you're not wasting time."

"Mm-mm," Chase moaned, though his mouth was full. The warm, velvety weight in his mouth twitched in response and Jackson gasped again. Chase sucked his cheeks in a little more, then drew his lips up toward the head. He swirled his tongue around before pushing his head down again.

One bob of his head at a time, he pulled Jackson along into ecstasy. Chase relished every quiet groan and gasp, every hitch in Jackson's breathing, every twitch of pleasure in Jackson's thighs... Most of all, he loved it when Jackson pushed his hips up for a moment before forcing himself back down.

Chase grabbed Jackson's hand and moved it to the back of his head. He met Jackson's eyes as he swirled his tongue several times along the head.

Jackson groaned and tightened his hand in Chase's hair. He gently pushed him down the shaft toward the base.

Christ, Chase was so hard it almost hurt. He moaned, his eyes flickering half-shut as he breathed carefully. He let Jackson pull him back up the shaft and push him down a couple more times.

Jackson gently nudged his cheek to push his head off his cock. "I don't want to be done already," he laughed. "You're so fuckin' hot."

Chase laughed. He scooted across the bed to grab a condom and lubricant. While he was at it, he fought his own jeans to pull them off and throw them aside so he was naked, too.

Jackson ran his hand up Chase's spine to the back of his neck and pulled him back in against him with a long, slow kiss. Jackson's lips sought out the tip of Chase's tongue, then Chase's lower lip. Jackson sucked sensitive skin until Chase's nerves were just about frayed.

Chase pressed harder against Jackson's lips, demanding a forceful kiss. In response, Jackson kissed hard enough to make Chase moan and pulled him back on top of his body. Jackson's wet cock ground up against Chase's stomach as Chase lay along his body. Jackson thrust his hips once or twice to tease him.

"Hnnh, I want you," Chase gasped against Jackson's lips, blindly grabbing for the lube and wetting his own fingers. He reached behind himself and between his legs, circling his fingers around his own hole.

Jackson's hand pushed in next to his. He swiped the lube from Chase's fingers onto his own. Chase moaned loudly when broad fingertips pressed into him. He relented, grabbing the bed instead to steady himself as Jackson's fingers smoothly slid inside past the tight ring.

"Yes," Chase gasped, thrusting against Jackson's body to grind his own hard cock against Jackson's firm stomach. The two fingers inside him were rubbing against *that* spot, exactly fucking right. Jackson remembered exactly what speed and pressure made him tick...

Of course he did. Fucking considerate boyfriend. Chase could handle that thought now, though. Unlike the first time they'd fucked, he didn't have that overwhelming pressure in his chest to run away when the focus was on his own pleasure.

No: he *wanted* Jackson to make him feel good. He deserved to feel good. And Jackson was *so good* at making that happen...

Chase moaned into Jackson's neck as Jackson wrapped his other arm around his back and ground against him. The warm skin of their chests and stomachs burned from the friction of their naked bodies pressing together.

Even the brushes of Jackson's skin against Chase's nipples made him shiver with pleasure. Those fingers buried deep inside him were the best part. He lost himself for a good minute of hazy pleasure. His cock throbbed and stiffened into an impossibly hard, aching weight with each brush of fingers against his prostate.

He somehow pulled himself out of the moment and moaned. "Okay, you keep your hands to yourself," he murmured, breathing out heavily as Jackson's fingers slid out. "Jesus Christ. Give me a chance to ride you before making me come."

Jackson's chuckle was deep but unapologetic. Chase grabbed the condom and tore it open. He pinched the tip and smoothly slid it down over that huge shaft before guiding the tip to his entrance.

He sat back and down slowly, kneeling upright now and spreading his knees to brace himself. As the hot weight slid in, filling him inch by inch, he rolled his head back. "Hnnh... yes, that's good," he moaned to himself. Jackson's nails bit into his hipbones. The sparks of pain sent tingles of pleasure through his stomach.

Chase's whole body tightened and twitched with pleasure, heating up instantly with the thick weight inside him. Jackson filled every inch of him. Taking him in at his own pace made his body ripple with pleasurable shivers. "Yes...!"

"Oh, yeah, baby," Jackson groaned his agreement. "You always feel so good."

Chase licked his lips, catching his breath. He made himself breathe out deeply as he settled down onto the base of Jackson's cock, his body shivering again. "So do you. You fill me right up. You're fuckin' big."

"I love that you can handle it all," Jackson gasped. "Come on. Ride me, Chase."

Chase grinned and leaned forward, his knees pressing into the mattress hard. He grabbed Jackson's shoulder with one hand and his hip with the other. He pulled his body up and rocked down again, taking a few thrusts to figure out his routine and angle.

When he found his balance, Chase set into a faster pace, pushing himself down and fucking himself on Jackson with all the energy he could muster. "Oh, yeah, Jackson," he gasped. "I'm nowhere near strong enough to do this the whole time, though..."

Jackson chuckled deeply, reaching around to cheekily slap his ass. "Let me know when it's just too much," he winked.

Chase grinned breathlessly. He rolled his head back with another throaty moan at the angle that thick cock head slid across his prostate. It ignited shivers of pleasurable heat that shot through his every limb, tingling from head to toe.

He lost himself in gasps and groans. Every small noise of approval and appreciation spilled from his lips in a chorus of pleasure. Jackson echoed him in sharp groans when he thrust particularly hard or clenched involuntarily around him in pleasure.

The haze of pleasure settled so thickly around him that within minutes, his pace was slowing. His heart pounded, sweat beading his brow as his arms and legs ached from the new and different angle. "Baby--"

Jackson grabbed his shoulder and hip, gently rolling them over. Chase wrapped his legs around Jackson's waist. With Jackson's weight blanketing him, his body pressed into the cool sheets underneath. Chase moaned his approval. "Yes... Jackson, please..."

"Please what?"

"Hard and fast," Chase begged. His body sparked with every little brush of Jackson's broad chest as Jackson's body surged against his. His boyfriend drove deep into him, making them both arch and moan in simultaneous pleasure.

He twitched and shivered again at Jackson's hand brushing down his chest and stomach to wrap around his throbbing cock. The ache of arousal burned through every fiber of his body. He gasped and shivered again at the sensitivity. That quickly settled into the pulsating rhythm of desire that thrummed through his body with every thrust of Jackson's hips.

Chase was too lost in the moment to be anxious or self-conscious, to

worry or daydream... Jackson was all that consumed his every thought.

He loved being with this man. He wanted to explore every fuckin' position with him until he had the stamina to ride him all night long. He wanted to hold him in the nights and tease him in the mornings, shower with him and cook him lunch...

He wanted to be Jackson's, utterly and completely.

Christ, Chase was in love. The way Jackson watched him told him he wasn't the only one. Jackson's eyes were wide and fixed on Chase's expressions. His gaze was tender as he watched Chase's every reaction to milk every last drop of pleasure out of him...

"Oh, fuck, I can't-- I'm about-- Jackson..." Chase panted, his eyes sliding closed for a moment as he arched against Jackson. Heat surged from deep within his belly and spilled out. His muscles seized and legs clenched hard around Jackson's firm body.

And he was coming, spilling into the blissful oblivion. He had just enough presence to feel Jackson's thrusts shudder and become hard and irregular. Jackson groaned hard.

Chase peeked at Jackson's pleasure-wracked face as Jackson drove into him. He clenched around Jackson, squeezing every last drop out of him as Jackson jerked his cock firmly and brought him through these seconds of bliss.

"Chase," Jackson gasped, looking almost like he wanted to say something. He bit his tongue and groaned instead, the sound a deep, guttural moan of pleasure.

"Yeah, babe," Chase moaned, twitching as the last few drops of pleasure trickled from his cock and Jackson let go of him. "Me, too."

Jackson smothered him with kisses until Chase laughed, leaning up into every kiss. Jackson softened and slid out of him but they kept kissing. Sometimes their lips didn't meet each other's, but landed on cheeks or noses or chins. It made no difference.

Chase's whole body burned with pleasure, tingles of ecstasy still running through his fingertips and toes. He shivered and rolled onto his side when Jackson pulled him in, finally burying his face in Jackson's shoulder.

"You're incredible," Jackson whispered. They both breathed hard, and Chase desperately tried to catch his breath.



"You, too," Chase murmured. "I've never... had anyone like you."

"Yeah," Jackson whispered. His voice was a little off. "I know the feeling."

Chase pulled back to look Jackson in the eye. "Hm?"

Jackson swallowed, then cupped Chase's face. "You're... I know this is early, but I love you. You don't have to--"

"I love you," Chase told him, loud and firm. He was certain of that. "It might be stupid, but I do."

Jackson's eyebrows rose, the surprise easy to read on his face. "Yeah? I felt a bit stupid too..."

"Fuck everyone who says you have to follow some schedule." Chase ran a finger along Jackson's side, then traced his ribs one at a time around his side to his spine. "I've dated guys for months and never felt half of what I have with you."

Jackson nodded slowly. "I didn't want to pressure you, but I felt it... so soon."

"Me, too," Chase smiled, and Jackson's eyes brightened in response. "We've known each other for ages anyway."

"Months isn't ages," Jackson snorted.

"It is," Chase clicked his tongue, and shut up Jackson's response with a kiss. "Anyway, you said it yourself. You can know you wanna spend your life with someone within weeks. As long as you have the same approach to a relationship."

Jackson was smiling, a teasing amusement glinting in his eyes. "Where's the cynic who told me the other guy could be lying about himself?"

"Well, if you *are* lying about being a good guy, you're a fuckin' *nice* bad guy," Chase snorted. "Which makes you a good guy anyway."

Jackson laughed, the sound carrying in the bedroom. He rolled onto his back and rubbed his face. "I... Okay."

Chase grinned. "Let me have that one."

"Okay, okay." Jackson laughed. He wrapped his arm around Chase and pulled him in close. "You're so stubborn you could head-butt a mountain out of the way."

"There's a testimonial. I like that one," Chase hummed, resting his

head on Jackson's shoulder. It was true: the only reason he'd gotten this far was from sheer defiance.

It was kind of nice to let go of that now and then, though, and Jackson was incredible at easing his defenses down for his own good.

Chase hummed, closing his eyes for a moment as they cooled off and recovered together.

*So stubborn*, Chase thought again, his lips quirking into a little smile. *I like that a lot.*

"There's one more thing," Jackson murmured. "But we have to get up for it."

Chase moaned at the prospect of pulling away from Jackson. "Not yet."

"Not yet," Jackson agreed, and lapsed into silence once more as they held each other. They were sticky and exhausted, but they couldn't keep their hands off each other.

Jackson's hand still rubbed along his chest or side or back. Chase rubbed his thumb in slow circles along Jackson's ribs.

This, right here, was heaven.

Jackson

“So, I might not have been *completely* honest...”

Chase visibly stiffened as he leaned against the kitchen counter and put his glass of water aside. They were both just in jeans, having skipped t-shirts. “About what?”

Jackson chuckled and winked. “Wanna wait here and see?”

“All right...” Chase eyed him and leaned on the counter.

Jackson grabbed his keys and trotted through the yard barefoot, sticking to the grass. He let himself into the workshop and grabbed the heavy bundle on the table, his heart racing. He paused to pat the wrappings back into place.

What would Chase think? Jackson prayed he liked it.

Jackson locked up after himself. Thomas's house lights were on, which was unusual for such a late hour. Jackson grinned again as he remembered what he and Cam had learned that afternoon. He strode on, though, and carried the armful back into the house.

By the time he was in through the patio doors, Chase's face lit up with anticipation.

“I wasn't finishing up a builder's job yesterday,” Jackson told Chase, grinning. “It was... something else.”

“No way. Already?” Chase murmured, his eyes fixed on the bundle.

“Yep. I'm pretty good,” Jackson winked. Honestly, it had taken days of work, usually at the beginning and end of his work days. An automatic hammer had sped up finishing the blade, but the whole process still took a lot longer than he'd ever tell Chase. His Friday work had been the finishing touches, and even that had taken a full day's work from dawn to dusk.

Chase reached out to take the bundle. He looked startled by the weight, and he reverently laid it on the counter. “Is it sheathed?”

“No. You'll have to find one,” Jackson chuckled. “I also haven't sharpened it since I wasn't sure if you were displaying it or what. I can

do that if you tell me.”

Chase stretched up to kiss him, then turned to pull back the corners of the fabric.

Jackson caught his breath as the silvery steel was revealed under the kitchen lights. It glinted and shimmered from all the polishing he'd done – endless grinding and polishing. The blade itself was true and straight. The guard was a beautiful woven strand of steel circling the hilt and blade. He'd incorporated all the design elements Chase had wanted and then some.

It fit Chase's hand perfectly when Chase wrapped his hand around the hilt to heft it.

“Oh, it's *heavy*!” Chase exclaimed.

Jackson grinned. “Yeah, it would be,” he teased. “Not like your fencing foils.”

Chase shook his head. “Not at all.” He gazed down the length of the blade then looked up at Jackson. “It's... It's phenomenal. I can't believe it. It's really mine?”

Jackson laughed, wrapping his arm around Chase's shoulder. “It's yours.”

Chase gingerly reached out to run his finger down the unsharpened blade. “I'd like to hang it up. I don't think I'm going to be using it, but if we can find an important spot...”

“Like where?” Jackson smiled.

“The living room? Right where people can see it?”

Jackson chuckled, combing his hand through Chase's hair. “You want to show it off?”

“Duh,” Chase snorted. “It's... incredible.” He couldn't take his eyes off it as he flipped it and turned it this way and that. He kept touching the hilt and the guard and the blade. Finally, he hefted it in both hands to check the balance. “It's nothing like a foil at all, but it's... just what I wanted.”

“Good,” Jackson murmured and kissed the top of his head.

Chase set it down on its wrappings, then threw his arms around Jackson's neck and kissed him hard.

“Ooh.” Jackson had no complaints about his reward. He grinned and

nipped Chase's lip, then kissed back as Chase's body melted against his.

Chase finally pulled back and murmured, "Thank you so much. I... I finished your design, by the way. We can go over it if you wanna see... or get it done..."

"Right now?" Jackson perked up. He hadn't expected this offer.

"Hell, yeah. You got my sword done in *blinding* speed," Chase laughed. "I've got the keys for the shop. Floyd won't care."

Jackson grinned. He wanted to get the tattoo as soon as possible, so why the hell not?

"Okay. Lead on."

---

Jackson shivered as he lay back in the chair, his arm relaxed as Chase's Sharpie traced over his bare skin.

"There," Chase murmured at last, leaning in to kiss his forehead before grabbing a mirror. Jackson twisted in his seat to see.

Oh, wow. That *did* look good.

A lion wrapped around his upper arm, its tail enveloped around his bicep as its mane spread across his shoulder. A sword lay between its paws. A hand caressed its mane – thankfully, this one wasn't a bloodied stump like the original family crest. Woven into the lines was the name *Riley*.

"That's incredible," Jackson murmured. "I... I want that."

"We won't be able to finish it in one session," Chase warned with a laugh. "You might be tough enough, but my hands have to stay steady. It'll take hours to finish it."

"Oh, shit," Jackson laughed. "Okay."

"We're just doing the lines this time, otherwise we'll be up until dawn," Chase grinned. "Okay?"

"Okay," Jackson agreed without hesitation. He shivered at the cold alcohol pad swiping across his shoulder, cleaning the skin. As much as he wanted to watch his lover at work, he leaned back and closed his eyes to let Chase work without interruption.

When the buzzing machine touched him, he was surprised at how

little pain he felt. It was more like an unpleasant electric shock than the tearing pain he'd expected. Chase's fingers against his skin were delicate, yet firm.

It was almost erotic in a strange way, and Jackson caught his breath at the thought. *Settle down... it's a long session yet.*

His thoughts wandered as Chase's needle worked – so much so that when Chase shut it off, Jackson looked over. It must have been an hour or more into it, and Chase had been silent and focused the whole time. “Hm?”

“We're done with the lines.”

“Already?” He twisted to take a look at his shoulder and grinned. The reddened skin patches around the Sharpie lines must have been where the needle was tracing. “Wow.”

“No regrets yet?” Chase teased, turning to sterilize the machine in quick, certain movements. It was kind of hot watching him be so proficient.

“None at all.” Jackson's gaze wandered to the shades between the lines. “When are you free to do the rest of it?”

Chase laughed. “We have to either do it tomorrow, before your skin starts properly healing, or wait about two weeks.”

“Fuck, no. Tomorrow it is,” Jackson told him. “If you're available.”

“I have one other tattoo booked tomorrow. I'm sure I can put aside time for a private client afterward,” Chase teased. “Let me just get some gauze on it to protect it overnight. It's gonna look great...”

Jackson gazed at Chase while Chase wrapped the bandage around his upper arm, taping it in place. “Guess I can't shower, huh?”

Chase grinned. “Nah. Baths would be better. I hope you weren't planning on getting filthy before tomorrow.”

“I suppose I can wait on everything I want to do to you,” Jackson teased. He eased himself up to his feet while Chase pulled him up by the hand. He slipped his t-shirt on, wincing at the prickling skin when the fabric pressed against the bandage.

“Ooh.” Chase was working quickly to sanitize the tattoo chair and workspace. He kept sneaking little glances at Jackson. “We can take a bath in your soaker tub tomorrow night...”

“Done,” Jackson agreed. When Chase was ready, he led him out to the

front then waited outside while Chase armed the security alarm.

He could hear frogs peeping down by the river in the warm night. Aside from occasional taxis passing and the sound of revelers a few streets away in the bar district, there was peace and quiet. It was a clear night, too, and the stars were out. Jackson craned his neck back to look up at the sky and enjoy the view.

He was only interrupted when Chase stepped outside and locked the door. His boyfriend tested it and pocketed the keys. "Home?" he suggested, taking Jackson's hand.

Jackson smiled and squeezed Chase's hand firmly, setting off in the direction of their house. "Home," he agreed.

He already knew exactly what was ahead: his warm, comfortable bed, and Chase wrapped up in his arms. Maybe he'd have to adjust his position a little to accommodate the sore skin of his shoulder, but that would pass within a few weeks' time.

Jackson's eyes wandered up to the stars overhead. The dimmer they were, the closer they were to the nearly full moon. He smiled and pointed up at it to draw Chase's gaze, then squeezed his hand. "Let's leave the blinds open tonight."

"Okay. I love the moonlight," Chase agreed with a smile.

Jackson winked. "And I love you in the moonlight."

Chase stopped him before he could step out into the crosswalk. The light had just turned red, but Jackson had been too busy watching Chase to notice. Chase laughed quietly, then stretched up and tilted his chin to get Jackson to kiss him. "I love you, too, you ridiculous, sweet man."

Jackson kissed Chase until the light turned green. Despite Chase's laughter, he still held onto him. He pressed his lips against Chase's and bumped their noses together until the light turned red again. Chase melted in his arms and kissed him back, Chase's hands cupping his face.

Chase was gonna be okay, and he would be, too. Jackson was certain of it: together, they were starting something beautiful.

Swish

THE RILEY BROTHERS BOOK 3

E. DAVIES



## Prologue

Alex

"I wanna make you feel good."

Alex's heart pounded as he pushed his fingers inside Thomas. He kissed at the corners of his lips and then the fullness of them.

Thomas moaned in response, then breathed out hard. His involuntary twitches were the hottest part. His body was so pleased that he arched off the bed, tensing up. Thomas pushed up into his fingers and circled his hips. He thrust them in rhythm with Alex's fingers.

Alex moaned his approval, watching as Thomas's body flinched and twitched.

He was already such a sight – skinny but gorgeous, naked and splayed on his bed, his hands digging into the bed near him.

Alex had never dreamed he'd see Thomas in *this* state. He was vulnerable with his need, and though his body was so familiar, it had also changed.

Christ, what a difference a handful of years made.

Now, Thomas knew what he wanted and Alex knew how to give him just that.

When Alex pulled his fingers out, Thomas squirmed. His flushed, wet cock bobbed in the air above his stomach while he tried to wait patiently.

Alex didn't want to make him wait. The condom and lube took just seconds, and then he was pressing his tip against the tight opening.

Thomas's eyes flew open. He ran his hand down his own stomach toward Alex's cock. Thomas's fingers were thin, nimble, and soft, from paperwork and a climate-controlled office. They wrapped around Alex's cock firmly.

"Nnh," Alex approved, echoing Thomas's groan. He pushed inside inch by inch as Thomas held him steady, letting Thomas get a feel for the thickness of the base of his cock.

Finally, when he was almost all the way inside, Thomas let go and

grabbed Alex's ass.

Alex's mind spun. "You're a little tease," Alex whispered. "I forgot."

"I have my – nnh – moments," Thomas moaned. The request made Alex's ears burn.

"Fuck me."

In his idle daydreams for *years*, Alex hadn't imagined Thomas being bold enough to ask for this.

But everything was different now.

Alex laced their fingers together, palm to palm. He stifled Thomas's moans of approval in open-mouthed kisses. He was going to make the most of this moment, but his gut instinct told him it wasn't his last chance.

They were together again. This was just their second beginning.

Thomas

"How's your hand?"

"I'll be fine," Cam laughed, the sound carrying through the cold winter morning. "It won't fall off from shoveling the driveway once. Let me do this."

Thomas glanced across his windshield to Cameron's driveway. His arms burned from scraping the ice off in quick, sharp thrusts of plastic across glass. It was the hard kind of ice; shard-like ice chunks sprayed across his hands and face.

God, January mornings were the worst. The sun wasn't even up yet, but he was already out and cleaning up the driveway with his brothers and their boyfriends. Now that Noah lived with Cam and Chase with Jackson, they had five people to help. Good thing since last night's freezing rain and snow had left a mess.

Sometimes only one or two of them got up early. They tried to shovel at least each other's walkways if they had time before work. Other times, Thomas barely had time to dig himself out of the snow, but when he came home from work his driveway was cleared.

It was nice to be able to count on his neighbors to swap favors. Living between his brothers had its perks, even if he wanted to knock their heads together sometimes.

With all the extra hours he was taking lately, helping cover shifts thanks to his coworker Cassandra's winter trip to the Caribbean, he was gone even more. Then again, he had a forty-hour work week as it was. He knew he was damned lucky.

"Getting cold?" Thomas called across the thin row of branches. In the summer, it was a leafy hedge separating their driveways.

Noah, the now live-in boyfriend of one of his big brothers, had already pulled off Cam's glove. He was rubbing Cam's right hand briskly to warm it up again. Ever since his denervation surgery, Cam had said half of his body reacted differently to the cold. But that was a small price to pay for a decreased risk of heart failure.

"No, I'm fine." Cam swatted Noah lightly and laughed. "I'll go inside if I'm in danger of frostbite." He pulled on his glove and briskly shoveled again, clearing a path down to the mailbox and street.

Noah still stayed nearby and eyed him suspiciously as he cleaned up after Cameron. He hadn't let Cam shovel alone over the last two weeks. Just before Christmas, Cam had been declared safe to occasionally exercise, but they still hadn't let him.

"What's wrong?"

Jackson was the oldest of the three brothers, and he lived on the other side of Thomas. He was leaning on his shovel and peering over the scraggly hedge at Thomas, then beyond at Cam. No doubt he was concerned that Cam was having an episode of some kind for the first time since surgery. Behind him, Jackson's boyfriend, Chase, was watching.

"No, it's fine," Thomas assured them both with a laugh. "Just his one cold hand."

"I've heard of special gloves that can warm your hands up," Chase spoke up. He pulled down the back gate of Jackson's truck to shovel the bed out. "I should've gotten you those for Christmas."

"Or a plane ticket to Florida," Cam suggested. "I'll accept that."

"Excuse me?" Noah pulled the rim of Cam's toque down over his eyes.

Cam laughed and yanked it back up again. "Two plane tickets," Cam corrected himself, grinning at his boyfriend.

Thomas's heart squeezed a little as he watched the two interact. Cam and Noah had been dating since April. They met when Cam and Thomas joined Jackson in their hometown of Fredericton. The two men were still going strong, and he admired the deep affection they both held for each other.

Jackson and Chase had only been dating since about August – exactly when wasn't really clear. Neither would say exactly when it had turned from friendship to romance. They were just as sweet as Cam and Noah.

That left just Thomas single. By choice as much as by chance, really. It wasn't like he hadn't had offers...

*Ugh.* Thomas pushed that thought aside and kept scraping the windshield, cleaning off the last few bits of ice. He pushed the wipers back down with twin muffled thumps and scraped the rest of the

windows.

At last, Thomas shoveled a path for his car down to the street. It was gonna be a little hairy until he got to the well-plowed streets beyond suburbia, but he'd grown up driving here. He knew as well as his brothers how to avoid losing all control.

In every area of his life, too. Sometimes, though he'd never admit it, he *wanted* someone to sweep into his life. He wanted to be unable to turn down a good thing. Noah had entered Cam's life with a bang, and Chase had started a whirlwind romance with Jackson.

Could he have something like that?

Thomas dropped off his shovel on the porch and grabbed his lunch from inside, then locked up his house. "See you guys later," he waved to a chorus of goodbyes as he climbed into his car and started it up. The engine turned over a few extra times. Then, it purred to life and he was gliding through the drifts for the short, chilly drive to the bank.

Alex

The rock music coming through the speakers in the car was so soft it was almost inaudible. Alex leaned back in the driver's seat, his profile half-hidden to passersby. Not that anyone was walking down the quiet street this time of night. It was the perfect location, and Alex ought to have been glad.

Instead, Alex was more restless than usual. He'd spent hundreds of hours, going on thousands by now, just sitting on stakeouts. This time, he got to sit in the car and listen to music. He even checked his phone when he dared to take his eyes off the front of the house. Compared to some of his previous cases in Ontario, and here in New Brunswick, this was a cakewalk.

"Must be the caffeine," he murmured to himself at last, rubbing his eyes. He focused on a few points, in the distance and close to him, to keep them fresh. He'd grabbed a coffee from Tim's before coming out here, expecting he might have to stay up late.

Alex much preferred the kind of surveillance that ended around three or four in the afternoon. He'd be home and relaxing in front of the TV before most people were even finished work.

But cheaters weren't always caught at noon. This one favored late nights, even though his wife was staying with a friend for the week.

This would be a lot easier if he could just go back to his old ways. Alex had been a *fantastic* honey trap, even for straight men like this Darren seemed to be. But he'd had to knock that off since moving back here. Plus, with a gay community this small, he might wind up working for women who'd married gay men. That came with too much baggage even for him.

Movement.

He froze, and then slowly raised his camera to rest on the windowsill. He hit the record button and zoomed in until he got a good look at the woman stepping out of the house. As far as he knew, the house didn't belong to either the cheater or the mistress, Anna. It was owned by one of Darren's buddies. That guy had to be in on it, or else the

cheating asshole Darren was good at keeping it quiet.

Darren's wife, Lexy, had hired him to find out for sure if Darren was cheating, and if so, with whom. She especially wanted to know if it was an ongoing affair or a one-time mistake. A series of one-time mistakes seemed better to her than an affair.

Alex had wanted to tell her that it didn't matter. An asshole cheating on her with a string of women was no better than with one woman. He knew a lot of people didn't think that way. Back in his honey trap days... well, Christ, he was glad to say goodbye to some aspects of that job.

The problem, of course, was that he had no other choice *than* to say goodbye to his Ontario jobs. He'd been forced to move back here, and now he had to take whatever cases he was offered. Things were getting a little better though. Lexy had gotten his name as a reference from a friend he'd worked with. Referrals meant steady business.

But still... there was no plan B.

Anna stepped into her car and waved, then pulled out of the driveway as Darren leaned in the doorway. Darren disappeared back inside and, within a minute, was back out and heading to his car. It was nothing to tail him back to his apartment building. Alex sat outside just long enough to make sure the lights were off and Darren had gone to bed, then rubbed his face.

That was it for the night. Hours of waiting and watching for one little clip in the 1 a.m. darkness. They hadn't even kissed goodbye.

"That's okay," Alex muttered. "I'll catch you sooner or later, asshole."

Alex pulled away again. He wanted rotisserie chicken and chips from the 24-hour grocery store nearby. He'd eat and watch TV by himself – as always – and get some sleep.

It was a far cry from his last life, where he might have gone to a club or picked a number from his phone after eating and showering. But he had a reputation to keep here.

"Rep, shmep," he muttered, but it was a peaceful protest. On some level, Alex appreciated a quieter routine in his sleepy, small hometown. The quiet hours watching people together just drove home the less-balanced aspects of his life.

And when he thought too hard about it, half his reluctance to go out and socialize was unsurprising. He'd had a steady downhill slide in his mood since... oh, November. Maybe it was SAD; maybe he was just

depressed about being stuck here. No longer was he making bank and sleeping with hot guys every other weekend.

He'd had friends, but he'd drifted out of touch with them over the summer. Working his ass off, taking every job he got, kept him too busy. A lot of people just didn't get his life – irregular schedules, confidentiality agreements, occasional danger... And then there was incredible monotony.

For once, he didn't let himself mope as he crawled into bed. When one guy turned him down, another might be around the corner. Sometime, he'd find what he'd been missing for years. Maybe not in exactly the same form, but... something close.



Thomas

"I can help the next--"

Thomas would know that face anywhere. Scruffy dark stubble, piercing bright eyes, pink lips curved up in a knowing little smile...

--person here," Thomas finished with determination. He ripped his gaze from the man at the back of the line to the front.

As the client stepped up to his window, Thomas took his debit card and the check he wanted to deposit. He moved on autopilot, as it took every ounce of determination he had not to stare at Alex.

Alex: his ex, the man who'd loved him and run. The man who'd bumped into him one day and got his number somehow. They'd texted, hot and cold, and then Thomas had gone cold. Finally, Alex had shown up at his house late one night. Thomas had *finally* said yes to his repeated pleas to see him. Alex had tried to apologize...

Thomas didn't like to think of himself as bitter, but he also thought he had perfectly good reason to be. Alex had fucked up both his brothers' lives. He'd spied on Cam and Chase, nearly putting Jackson in harm's way too.

But he still remembered the way Alex's face had fallen that late August evening. Alex had so passionately explained how he hadn't *meant* to harm them. He'd been hired to find out Cam's disability status and Chase's location. He had to take the jobs. Thomas had reminded him that the end result was the same.

And besides, he hadn't forgiven Alex for fucking running out on him *before*. That was back when Alex was eighteen and Thomas was sixteen. Love then was getting a ride home from Alex after classes and feeling each other up in the south Fredericton parks.

Fuck.

Thomas cleared his throat. "The funds will be processed and available within five business days. Can I help you with anything else?"

"No, thanks," the client answered, taking back his card and leaving with a quick goodbye.

Alex was three from the front.

The next customer wanted the limit raised on his debit card. That was a quick job, but Thomas refused to rush through it. He wasn't going to try to get Alex, or to avoid serving him. He was going to proceed at the same damn pace he always did.

Thomas's throat went dry, and his, "Have a good day..." almost died on his lips. The client walked off and he looked up for the next one.

Alex was at the front of the line.

Before he invited him up, Alex was crossing the smooth tile floor, striding toward him. His winter jacket was unzipped. Thomas's gaze crawled briefly up the leather jacket underneath. Alex wore dark jeans and a collared shirt that hugged the smooth skin of his neck...

He hadn't seen Alex since he'd sent him home that night in August after the barbecue. Alex had tried to flirt with him and Thomas had... crushed him. Thomas had never specifically said he *didn't* want a date. He'd just told him flat-out that he had a lot to deal with without Alex trying to charm the pants off him.

Thomas hoped his voice was steady. "How can I help you?"

That smile was back. Alex's slow smile, the way his eyes crinkled in the corners and his teeth glinted... Thomas had loved that smile from the first time he saw it.

"Nice to see you again, Thomas." Alex folded his arms and leaned on the counter, closing the scarce space between them. It was like electric jolts jumped between them, even though a good foot still separated them.

Thomas's heart raced and he kept his grip on his mouse firm as his skin tingled. "You, too." Alex's eyes were locked on his, and his lips were slightly parted as he drew a breath. Thomas resisted the urge to stare at his lips, as much as he wanted to. Those lips had once known where exactly on his neck would make him hard in seconds.

Did Alex still remember those spots? Was he even better now?

Alex's eyes dragged down from Thomas's eyes to his lips, then his neck. Thomas's chest pounded as he tried to dismiss those ideas. He resisted the urge to tug his collar up or flatten his tie and just glanced at his computer, then back at Alex. "Can I help you?"

Alex was looking him in the eye again, squarely enough that it almost made Thomas wonder if he'd indulged in fantasy instead of

observation. But no, there was no imagining the glint behind Alex's eyes when he saw something he wanted.

Every damn time he bumped into Alex, there it was again. And it always felt like they'd split up just a week ago, maybe a month ago – not years ago. The chemistry between them was still as raw and passionate as if they were waiting to fall into bed at any moment.

“I need to make an appointment to discuss mortgages.”

Thomas's eyebrows rose. The young man who'd run to Ontario just as Thomas had been considering taking the biggest leap of all with him? Now he was getting a mortgage? “On a local property?”

Alex didn't miss the implication. His brows drew together slightly. Then the look disappeared, replaced by an ironic little smile... maybe even self-deprecating. “Yes. I'm settling down and looking for a house. But the appointment has to be next Thursday at two PM. My schedule is... quite busy.”

“Well, the service desk is over there,” Thomas said as politely as possible. Someone else was in charge of that, and he had the oddest feeling Alex had known that. Alex had just wanted to see him and maybe... tempt him. Christ, and it worked every time. Thomas licked his lips and straightened up. “Maggie can help you book an appointment at a convenient time.”

“Thank you,” Alex murmured, then straightened up again.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?” Thomas narrowed his eyes slightly in warning. The Alex he knew would make a lewd comment, and now was hardly the time or place.

Alex's eyes crinkled as that self-assured little smirk curved his lips. Then, Alex shook his head. “No, thanks. Have a good day.”

Thomas was left watching his retreating back as Alex walked toward the service desk to make his appointment. He pulled himself back together and looked for the next customer.

No matter what Alex thought, he wasn't lying around and moping, waiting to fall into his arms or bed. Of all the people Alex had known or dated, Thomas hadn't heard of anyone more resistant than him. Not just because Thomas liked playing hard-to-get, but because... that was the way he was.

And, as ever, that seemed to be exactly what pulled Alex to him like a moth to a porch light. What pulled Thomas to Alex in return? Everything about him, whether Thomas liked it or not.

Thomas pushed him out of mind to focus on his clients' needs. He couldn't be distracted at work – not while he was angling for a promotion.

He needed this. He was definitely the lowest-paid of the three of them, even though Cam had seasonal work and Jackson was practically a freelancer. Tellers didn't earn a fortune, and he had house renovations to pay off.

Work was his future; love was a fleeting fancy, so work came first. And work *definitely* came before exes and enemies. And both, in one sexy, smoldering, self-assured package of hunk that Thomas wanted so badly to hate.

Alex

Fuck, Thomas was *hot*.

Since he did his banking online, Alex hadn't had a chance to run into Thomas since August. But Thomas was hotter than ever. He was clearly sorting out conflicting emotions: anger and attraction. Oh, yeah. Alex had seen the way Thomas shifted...

And there was always that unspoken thread between them.

They missed each other, on some level or another. Maybe most exes did. Alex hadn't stuck around any of his other exes long enough to find out. He'd ditched one and gone straight to another, cutting exes out of his life with surgical precision. Impossible to do that here, even if he'd wanted to. The town was too small. Thomas, of course, worked at Alex's goddamn bank and he wasn't about to switch banks to avoid his ex. That was a low he refused to stoop to.

Really, Alex *didn't* want to cut Thomas out. He'd wanted more. A date, maybe, to get to know each other again after all these years.

Alex had known Thomas moved back to town about a month after he had. He'd sent a few texts, but they'd never really gone anywhere. Just casual brushoffs from Thomas. So he'd kept his distance at first before going to the Rileys' neighborhood barbecue last summer. He'd had to tell Chase that his asshole family was gone for good... and of course, Thomas had been right there.

They'd swapped words and Thomas had invited him over that night. Just as Alex thought he might get lucky, Thomas put down his foot and told him not to keep asking him out. Alex respected that, much as he disliked it.

Thomas had never actually said he didn't *want* to see him again, though. He'd said Cam was sick, Jackson and Chase needed renovation help, his family had lots on the go, work was busy...

Not that he didn't *want* a date.

Alex had let him get away with it, but it still bugged him.

He got to the front of the short line in front of the service desk. Right.

The appointment.

“Hello,” he greeted, turning on his usual charming smile. “I wondered if you'd help me arrange an appointment to discuss mortgages. I have a rough work schedule, though. I'm really only available around 2 p.m. next Thursday. I'm sorry for being difficult.”

“Oh, not at all, love. That's fine. I'll see what I have for that time.”

Warming people up with an apology worked a charm here in Atlantic Canada. He'd missed that.

“Well, the closest I have is two-thirty... would that be fine, Mr. Walker?”

Score. He'd just turn up early for his appointment. “That's okay,” he assured this receptionist – Maggie – with another bright smile. “Who's the appointment with?”

“Lisa, one of our senior loan officers.”

“Thank you. Excellent.” Lisa's office was next to Anna's. He might get a glimpse into Anna's office on the way past. He'd have to bring a hidden camera... maybe the phone in the shirt front pocket trick.

The next step was to watch Anna for the next day or two. Darren might be visiting her. He'd do that once she left work – for now, he had enough time to grab lunch.

He took the card with the appointment time and wished Maggie a good day. On the way past the tellers' desks, Alex let his gaze sweep across the empty lineup and desks. Lunchtime over with, the rush to get to the bank had subsided.

He wasn't surprised to see Thomas watching him. Thomas tore his gaze away and looked at the computer, but he was blushing.

Alex smiled again as he pushed open the heavy bank door and stepped onto the icy sidewalk. As he walked out, he felt Thomas's eyes on him. A glance through the window confirmed it; he was looking at him again. Alex winked to let him know he'd seen him before walking off.

For the first time in days, his heart was light despite the gray skies.

He might win Thomas over yet.

Thomas

"I'm fine with pasta."

"Are you sure?" Thomas poured a little more white wine into the pan and stirred the chicken and vegetables again. He glanced over at Noah, who sprawled on a stool at the breakfast bar. Noah's elbow was propped on the counter, chin on his fist.

"Quite sure," Noah chuckled. "Carb-loading to make up for shoveling snow. I hope the winter's not going to be that bad. Early mornings are the worst."

Thomas grabbed a box of cream from the fridge. "Only another few months. But yeah... going to the bank before it's light and coming home after it's dark when I work such an easy job..."

"Mmhmm. And the days are getting longer." Noah twirled a lock of his hair.

"Exactly." Thomas shut the fridge and poured cream into the pan, then added some flour to make a creamy sauce. The pasta water boiled, so he dumped the noodles in.

Noah perked up a little. "How's your work thing coming along?"

Thomas tensed up, the stress ball knotting his chest. "I'm helping everywhere I can. Irma needed help with a late client yesterday and I did that. Uh, I'm kind of helping Maggie out when she's not at her desk. I'm trying to show initiative."

"You think they're hiring soon?"

No. Thomas sighed. "I... don't know. At the very least, I can get a good performance review. Or a good reference if I switch to another bank that *does* need senior positions filled."

"How desperate are you?" Noah asked. "Are you talking sometime down the road, or now?"

Thomas winced. He wasn't running out of money – his job covered the bills, after all – but with the extra money on the mortgage from renovations, his savings were gone. He wasn't earning quite enough to

replenish them. And unlike Cam, who split bills with Noah, and Jackson, who had Chase to help out, he was a single-income household. "Sooner the better."

"You can always do casual work--"

"No, no," Thomas chuckled lightly, trying to brush it off. "So, enough about me... you think you've got SAD for sure?"

"I'm almost sure of it," Noah sighed, easily distracted. "I've got one of those light lamps from Costco though."

"Oh yeah?" Thomas stirred the pan as the sauce thickened. "Is it helping?"

Noah nodded. "A little. Being around Cam all the time helps. It's not much fun having to go to work more than him."

Since surgery, Cam hadn't gone to work. As an apprentice beekeeper, it was the down season anyway. There wasn't much Cam's boss, Noah's uncle, and Cam could do in the middle of the winter. Of course, Noah still had to go to the gallery where he worked as an art curator.

"That must be hard," Thomas nodded. "Cam's resting up, though, huh? How's he doing?"

"He's hoping to lower his beta blocker dose in the next month or two. When he gets back to Toronto for the next follow-up, they're gonna see if it's safe." Noah fidgeted with his hair, then picked up his beer bottle for a swig. "So far, he hasn't fainted at all or even felt dizzy."

"Since surgery? And it's been a month now," Thomas marveled. "That must be awesome."

"It's incredible! We're hoping he won't have to get an ICD." That brought a smile to Noah's face. "And he's been exercising since then, too. And we've been testing things out, too, you know..."

Thomas laughed and cut Noah off. "Okay, I'm glad, but I'm fine without knowing more."

"Yeah," Noah grinned. "Still only a couple times a week, but--"

"That's plenty enough," Thomas snorted, shutting off the stove. He dumped the pasta into a strainer, then back into the pot. Once he added the sauce and stirred it together, he looked at Noah when there wasn't an answer. Noah was watching him with a raised eyebrow. "What? It is, for most people..."

"Yeah, but we missed half our honeymoon phase."



Thomas winced. Cam hadn't even been properly diagnosed when they'd met. Cam had had to travel back to Ontario to see real experts. When they'd figured it out, he'd been instantly banned from exercise and his sex life had been... rather limited. Most new couples *did* have the most active sex life in those first few months of living together.

Or so popular myths said. Thomas didn't know from personal experience.

"Sorry," Thomas told him. "I didn't think about that."

Noah shook his head, forgiving the mistake. "It's fine. I'm just glad things feel more... normal now."

Thomas nodded, ladling pasta into two bowls. "I should probably get laid now and then, too," he smiled. "I don't know what's normal." It was still bizarre talking about his love life with anyone even remotely connected to his family. He was trying.

"Mm? I can go out to the bar with you," Noah offered, grinning. "Or Chase. You know he's up for a gay club... *the* gay club." There was only one in town, after all. His eyes narrowed as he watched Thomas's reactions.

Thomas shook his head, not giving Noah anything to work with. Those weren't his scenes at all. Besides...

"There's someone else who's been on my mind. I just don't know if it's a good idea," Thomas admitted, carrying the bowls over to the table.

Noah slid off the stool and sashayed over. "Ohhh? You've never mentioned someone before." His eyes gleamed with mischief. "Who is this person?"

"It's... it's a long story," Thomas laughed. "But I've been kind of avoiding them since... oh, August..."

"*August?*" Noah dropped his fork in his bowl. "Jesus, Thomas, it's January! Did you ghost them?"

"Ghost them?" Thomas didn't know that term.

"Go offline, you know – block them or stop responding after a good date, with no explanation. Just vanish."

Thomas shook his head. "Not exactly." He nibbled his lip, then dipped his fork into the pasta. "Bon appetit."

"Merci," Noah winked. "But, man, it's already mid-winter. If you're still thinking about them..." He counted quickly on his fingers. "Four,

five months later...?”

*Months? Try four or five years!* “I know. It's stupid,” Thomas laughed. “But... maybe I'll try a date.”

“They're still interested in you?”

Oh, definitely. With the way Alex had looked him over at the bank... then winked at him on the way out... Alex was still interested.

He was just waiting for Thomas to say the word. And he knew Alex was going to come into the bank next Thursday...

Or maybe he shouldn't be looking to get over Alex by seeing him again. Maybe he should be looking for someone else. He had an online dating profile that he checked every week or two. He'd never had more than one or two dates with any guy he'd met through it. If he thought too hard about it, Thomas knew he'd always subconsciously compared them to Alex.

Maybe he'd have another look, though.

---

Once Noah was back with Cam and Thomas was alone in his house, he started up his laptop and navigated again to the dating site. He sprawled on the couch, the laptop on his stomach as he squinted at the screen. He awkwardly typed in the password, the screen rising and falling as he waited for it to load.

A few new messages, but none of them were interesting. One was from a student. Technically, the guy was his own age, but Thomas was out of school and in a different stage of life. It just felt weird to date students. A couple were for hookups and not with anyone really appealing. Now and then, he added *casual sex* to the list of things he was looking for, but only once every few months, when his urges got too strong.

There wasn't an easy way to say he only wanted to date men if they were a lot like... fucking Alex.

“For fuck's sake.” Thomas closed his laptop and dug out his phone, pressing it to his forehead for a second. He half-hoped Siri would whisper to him that this was a bad idea.

With no enlightenment coming from the gadget, he unlocked it and opened a new text message. He added Alex's number.

*Good seeing you. Want to hang out?*

Thomas hesitated for a long minute, debating if he should add something: *I'm still annoyed at you*. Or worse yet, *Do you miss me?* He pressed “send” before he took back the decision. Then, he shoved the phone under himself and rubbed his face with a groan.

He didn't trust himself to be alone with Alex. No matter how much some things about Alex annoyed him, his apology had been sincere. And as much as he hated that Alex had left him to train for his career in the big city and probably fuck guys who were *properly* gay, that had also been years ago.

And they'd never fucked. As high school boyfriends, Thomas had always said no. He hadn't been ready for it. Unlike all his shitty peers, he'd never had a problem saying no and meaning it. And Alex had never pushed him hard. He'd coaxed now and then, but when it was clear that Thomas just wasn't into it, Alex had gracefully accepted that.

Of course, Thomas had fucked other men later, when he was ready to admit he wanted it. But he'd never loved a man as deeply as Alex, and the two of them had never gone that far. Maybe the key to getting over Alex was doing it for the first time.

It was logical enough, on the surface. At least it was a great excuse for falling into bed with his first boyfriend and now least favorite person.

And this opened up the lines of communication again. It was the first time since he'd invited Alex over in August to tell him – in less abrasive terms – to fuck off. Alex had respected his wishes. It was scary to think how much he'd *wanted* Alex to call him, just out of the blue.

This was the permission he sensed Alex had been waiting for.

“Enough bullshit thinking,” Thomas muttered, hauling himself to his feet. He'd clean the living room, just in case Alex did come over. And if Alex wasn't interested, he'd still have a clean living room. He refused to admit that he was listening over the vacuum cleaner's hum for the chime of his cell phone.

Alex

Alex's phone vibrated in his pocket. He didn't drag his eyes off the house for a moment. He fumbled for his phone, swiping his fingers down the screen to get it to read out the text.

*Text message today at 8:02 PM. Thomas.*

*Good seeing you. Want to hang out?*

The phone's voice was about the least sexy thing imaginable. It made Alex grin nonetheless. "Fuck, yeah," he whispered.

He squinted through the living room window as he pressed the speech button and dictated. "Would love to see you, period. When and where, question mark." Then, he pressed send.

Seconds later, he had an answer read out in the same rapid robotic voice. He really needed to change it to some sexy man, at least.

*Text message today at 8:05 PM. Thomas.*

*Tonight.*

"Oh, yeah," Alex smirked. He leaned back in his seat again, raising his camera when he saw motion. It was only a brief flicker, though, so he frowned and lowered it again.

Since Darren had walked into Anna's house two hours ago, there had been no sign of activity. More importantly, the living room drapes were open. If they weren't socializing in the living room like platonic friends...

Heh, and Thomas wasn't texting to socialize. He'd cracked that facade with his visit to the bank, he was certain of it. The only question was: did Thomas just want to hook up, or did he want more afterward? Was this flame rekindling, and if so, did Thomas like that idea as much as he did?

He dictated, "I'm working until late, comma, probably past your bedtime, period. Still OK, question mark?" It came easily to him to dictate texts now when he couldn't take his eyes off the stakeout. It had taken weeks of practice to get used to it, though.

*Text message today at 8:09 PM. Thomas.*

*That's fine. Come over to my house when you're done with work.*

Alex smirked and dictated, "Great, period. See you soon, period." He folded his hands behind his head and stretched out. God, he hoped Darren was going to have an early night.

---

Alex got his wish: around nine-thirty, there was a stir of motion in the window. He pressed *record*, then rolled down his window and watched closely.

The microphone was aimed in just the right spot. After a few seconds of wind crackling, he picked up on sound.

--at the cross-country ski cabin?"

Anna's voice was unmistakable after having tracked her for days. "The main cabin? Yeah, at noon?"

Darren murmured his agreement. "Noon's great. We'll figure out the details on Thursday..."

"Shh," Anna giggled. Alex rolled his eyes but listened and watched closely. They were standing a bit too close, but there was no physical contact. No real evidence yet.

But he was positive that Lexy's suspicions had been right. And now he knew when and where to get the video his client and Darren's wife, Lexy, wanted.

"I'll see you alone, right?"

"Of course. I'll feign a headache and keep the lights dim and the blinds closed..." Anna's voice was soft now, almost inaudible as she sidled flirtatiously. Then, she shooed him with her hands. "Go on, you better get home before the roads get bad."

Darren waved. "I'll see you Thursday afternoon, Ms. Forester. I sure hope we can work out some favorable terms..."

He was stepping into his car now and Anna laughed as she went inside, shaking her head. Alex held his breath, but Darren didn't look around. He just started up and carefully pulled out onto the street.

After shutting off the camera and microphone, Alex cracked his knuckles.

It was a good thing they were cross-country skiing, not downhill. Alex could do cross-country. He'd break his neck trying to follow them downhill.

God, this job was made for him. Alex let his ego swell warmly in his chest. He waited a few minutes, then started up the car to drive toward Thomas's house. Snowflakes fell thickly on his windshield, but snow or no snow, he had an appointment to keep.

## Thomas

Thomas wasn't even twenty-two years old yet. Ten o'clock ought to have been early to him, he knew. But he'd never been the type to go out clubbing until all hours. Neither did he like to wake up early. He usually went to bed around ten and read for a few hours before falling asleep.

Still being up and dressed at ten, pacing around the living room and tidying up, was downright weird. Knowing he was waiting for Alex, who could blow through right now or at 3 a.m., was even worse.

From nine onward, every time he heard a purring engine on the street, Thomas peeked through the blinds. He knew it was too early since Alex said he'd be up late, but he couldn't help himself.

It was a surprise when he pushed aside the blind and a familiar dark car was parked at the bottom of his driveway. The driver's side car door opened.

*Oh, Jesus. Here he comes.*

Thomas refused to wait by the door. He sat on the couch, aware of his hands in his lap, his heart pounding in his chest. He *felt* Alex's approach up the walkway to his porch and his door...

For a moment, it felt like Thomas was being stalked by a predator he'd invited home. It didn't scare him – it thrilled him.

The doorbell rang and the moment of tension was gone. He stood up, briskly heading for the door and opening it.

Sure enough, Alex leaned on his door frame, all muscles and confident smile. His hair was messy and stuck up on the back, his thumb in his jacket pocket.

Christ, he was so fucking hot.

Thomas pushed open the screen door until Alex moved, then stepped inside to let him in. "Hello."

"Hey there," Alex answered. Thomas almost wished he'd wipe that arrogant little smirk off his face, but it looked too damn hot. "I got off

early.”

“I trust that doesn't happen often.”

Alex paused, his smirk growing into a grin as they both registered the innuendo of the moment. Thomas's cheeks heated up, but he refused to take back the words. “No. Not often.”

“Come on in.”

Alex left his jacket and shoes in the foyer and Thomas led him into the house. “Want a drink of water or anything?”

“No thanks. I'm good.”

They moved together for the couch. For a moment, as Alex and Thomas sank down together and turned toward each other, it felt like old days. It was like they were about to grab PlayStation controllers or a DVD to watch together...

Thomas swallowed hard and caught Alex's gaze. “I'm still angry at you for taking the job for Cam, knowing he was my brother. And about what happened when we broke up,” he told him plainly. “But I haven't been able to get you out of my head. Seeing you at the bank... God, it felt like no time had passed since August.”

“When you threw me out?” Alex quipped, his lips drawing up from a serious listening face to a teasing one instead. “I knew you shouldn't have. I knew we still had chemistry.”

Thomas glared at Alex. He couldn't deny it: having Alex sitting so close their knees bumped made a jolt of pleasure run through him. The electric chills reminded him of everything they'd had together – and what they hadn't.

“So this isn't a first date... or first-date-since... well, you know.” Alex trailed off and laughed. “This is a booty call.”

“That's not--” Thomas cut himself off. Okay, maybe it was a little accurate.

Fuck, he wasn't the kind of guy to have hate sex with his ex. This wasn't about being angry. And he'd slept with strangers before, in his experimenting days in Halifax.

Why did this feel so different?

“Maybe,” Thomas corrected himself, his voice tight as he clenched his jaw. He dug his fingers into the back of the couch behind Alex's head, touching his hair with his other hand. “That's probably the best



description.”

Alex's fingertips on the back of his hand were surprisingly gentle. “I won't tell a soul,” he murmured, drawing Thomas's gaze back to his own.

God, those beautiful, long-lashed eyes. He lost himself in those eyes for a moment. He *wanted* to lose himself even further...

Alex's hand ran up his arm toward his shoulder and the last of Thomas's resistance melted away. The pleasurable tingles at being touched by familiar, skillful hands overwhelmed him. Even more chills of pleasure reverberated down his spine.

Thomas's breath caught as Alex slid closer so their thighs pressed together. He turned sideways and hooked his ankle around Thomas's as if he were about to roll over and straddle him. First, though, Alex took the time to touch the back of Thomas's neck. Alex played with the short hairs there as he looked him up and down.

“You got hotter.”

Thomas blushed. “You were always hot,” he murmured. Alex had only been a couple years older, but by god, he'd looked twenty before he was even out of school. That was probably how he'd gotten hired in security right out of high school.

Right when Thomas had been ready to say yes to everything Alex meant.

He swallowed back the memory. Strangely, it wasn't hard to do so. The moment was melancholic, not bitter. “Kiss me.”

Alex's lips were on his.

Their lips slid together slowly at first, as if trying to relearn each other. It had been years, after all, and a lot of kisses since then with other men.

That distance was forgotten in seconds. Alex's kiss was sweet at first, all lips rubbing and gentle caresses of teeth against Thomas's lower lip. Then, it grew dirtier. Alex's tongue pressed at Thomas's lip, then teased the tip.

Alex tangled his hand in the hair at the back of Thomas's head. Alex pulled him in, their noses bumping. He pulled back enough to shift his weight until he straddled Thomas's lap.

Thomas burned with heat as he grabbed Alex's shoulder blades to yank him closer. He ran one hand down that muscled back. His hand

swooped down the curve of Alex's spine into the small of his back. As Alex shivered, Thomas cupped Alex's ass and squeezed.

Alex moaned his approval. Their fronts pressed together with heat. Too many clothes were in the way, but Thomas appreciated the teasing heat of the warm, solid body against his own. He was breathless as Alex kissed him again, his eyes fluttering closed for a minute to enjoy it.

Alex's cock pressed against his own through layers of denim and fabric.

*Oh, Christ. I want it.* Thomas's breath caught in his throat and he rolled his head back to try to keep his chest from heaving. Alex was having none of it, though; he kept kissing Thomas's neck and throat. He was seeking out those spots...

*He does remember!*

Alex's lips landed just beneath his ear. Thomas's body jolted and shuddered with pleasure. His cock was aching hard already, but it twitched particularly at that move. Gentle sucking against that spot made nerves spark to life. His fingertips tingled as Alex moaned and pulled back.

"C-Come upstairs," Thomas whispered. He pushed at the solid weight of Alex's body until Alex decided to shift and stand up. Alex's hand gripped his to pull him up to his feet, and Thomas appreciated it. Being hauled around by him was scorching hot. Like he needed anything else to daydream about.

"I'd be glad to. Show me the way."

Thomas strode up the stairs. He hadn't even made it to the third step before he Alex's hands cupped his ass and swatted it.

"Oi," Thomas laughed, but he was grinning too hard.

"It's just right *there*," Alex protested, following close behind him. "I can't help but admire it."

Thomas shook his head again and tried to speed up his pace. His heart pounded with arousal and thrill and... joy.

This was *fun*. They'd barely even made out, yet already, he was having more fun than with some stranger from a dating site.

Then he stumbled, adrenaline rushing to his head. He grabbed for the handrail and the wall, his foot sliding off the step.

A strong arm had him around the waist and hauled him back to his feet. Alex's other hand was on his chest, helping him straighten up. "Careful there," Alex teased. "I don't want to use my first aid training."

"Of course you have first aid training," Thomas grumbled. He deflected attention from his racing heart and flushed cheeks. His already-hard cock pulsed and throbbed, the sudden shock giving him a little extra blood flow.

"I can give you mouth-to-mouth."

Thomas reached the top of the stairs. Alex still had his fingers hooked through Thomas's belt loops to keep him close. He rolled his eyes at Alex. "I don't want to bust a lung."

"Just a nut."

"Alex!" Thomas's cheeks were hot, but he laughed despite himself. "Christ, you've got the same old attitude."

Alex winked. "I think that was your favorite part of me. Well, second-favorite."

Thomas grabbed Alex and shoved him through the doorway. He kicked the bedroom door shut. "Get in here and shut up."

"Gladly," Alex whispered. He pinned Thomas against the door. Their bodies burned as they both moaned through the silence of the bedroom. The light wasn't even on yet. Alex grabbed Thomas's hands, lacing their fingers together... He pulled both hands above Thomas's head to pin him there and kissed him slow and *filthy*.

"Hnnh," Thomas moaned through the kiss, pushing forward to suck on Alex's lips. He couldn't breathe already, his body burning with need. "Fuck..."

"Wha'?" Alex whispered and kissed. His breath was warm on Thomas's swollen lips. He ground his hard cock against Thomas's, through their jeans.

Thomas shook his head. He didn't even know what to ask for; his mind spun too much. Hazy memories of the Alex before were gone now. It was all *this* Alex, here and hot, his body hard all over and eyes twinkling with mischief. "You're a cocky bastard."

"Mmhmm." Alex yanked him away from the door, steering him over to the bed. It was all Thomas could do to grab Alex's shoulders and pull him along when Alex pushed him down on the bed. They fell

together, their legs tangling for a moment, hands already pushing at each other's clothes.

Thomas couldn't stop watching Alex's body, as it was revealed, piece by piece, once again. His chest rippled with new muscles. His stomach, tense with arousal, showed off at least a six-pack. His nipples poked through the cool bedroom air. They just begged to be sucked.

Thomas fought his shirt off and tossed it aside, watching Alex's eyes darken with hunger and scan him from head to toe.

"You always were, but you're still fuckin' hot," Alex whispered. "Just wanna eat you up."

The delicious promise had Thomas's toes curling into the bed. He wouldn't complain if Alex wanted to suck him off first or kiss him all over... tease him...

"You can do whatever you like," Thomas murmured. "As long as you fuck me, too."

Alex's eyes widened as he caught Thomas's eyes. "Really?" So he remembered their history as well as Thomas.

"I like it," Thomas nodded.

Alex snorted. "I told you, you would. How long did you wait?"

"Til I went to Halifax... two years after you left." For the first time, the words didn't even have a barb behind them.

Alex raised his eyebrows, then leaned down to kiss Thomas's chest. "Was it worth the wait?"

"Not really."

Alex barked with sudden, surprised laughter. Thomas's brutal honesty had always been a great source of pleasure for him. "Oh. Sorry." He licked around Thomas's nipple, then kissed his chest back up to the hollow at the base of Thomas's throat.

"It's okay. It got better and better. I like it now," Thomas murmured. "I just don't... hook up a lot these days. I had a year or two of it in Halifax, and that was it."

Alex looked thoughtful. Thomas leaned in to grab his cheeks and tilt his head up to kiss those beautiful, pink lips. "What?"

"I've... been cutting back, too," Alex admitted. "I did a lot in Ontario, and..." he trailed off, then just kissed Thomas instead.

Thomas understood. He'd always suspected a part of Alex was compensating for some hidden fears. Like he tried to prove to himself that he deserved the ego he had. There was a man behind that cocky facade that wanted to settle down... someday.

Alex was avoiding eye contact, so Thomas took the pressure off. "You gonna take my jeans off or make me rut against you like we're in the backseat of your car again?"

"Demanding," Alex grinned. He grabbed Thomas's belt and pulled it open. Those broad, yet graceful hands worked quickly. He teased the zipper down and stripped the fabric from Thomas's tingling skin. Alex pulled underwear and socks down with jeans to leave him naked.

Thomas didn't feel vulnerable for a second. Instead, he grabbed at Alex's belt, too, and popped it open, then his jeans button, then the buttons of his fly. Alex bucked with his hands to help him get the fabric down to his mid-thighs, then took over to kick everything off.

Alex was hard already, his cock bobbing free in the air. Thomas had almost forgotten how fuckin' big he was. It was impossible to miss when that thick length rubbed against the inside of his hip and his inner thigh. Alex settled down on top of him to kiss him a few more times.

As Alex's body settled on his own and blanketed him, Thomas's skin burned in every spot where they touched. Their chests, their stomachs, their thighs, even their ankles and arms and hands tingled...

Alex's fingers laced between his own again. Alex pinned his hands above his head to kiss him nice and slowly.

This time, with his cock free and pressed between their stomachs, it was less of a tease. Thomas thrust his hips up in a few short, sharp thrusts, grinding against Alex to tease him into action.

"Got condoms and stuff?" Alex murmured.

"All my *stuff* is in a box in the bedside table. Top drawer."

"Clever. Good place for stuff."

Thomas snorted. "Thanks. Choose whatever stuff you want." Alex pulled open the drawer, then fished around until he found the little box. That was where Thomas kept condoms, lube, tissues, and a couple other odds and ends.

"Really? Going Better Homes and Gardens with your condoms? Fancy-ass."

"It's fuckin' navy blue." With floral print, yes, but navy blue nonetheless.

"How adorable."

"Fuck off," Thomas groaned.

Alex set the box on the bedside table and pulled the lid open, then grabbed a condom and lube. He was still laughing as he set everything down next to Thomas and scooted back down to lie against him again.

Thomas ground against him and grabbed the lube. "God, you're insufferable."

"Sorry," Alex grinned. He plucked the bottle out of Thomas's hand. "I wanna do that."

Thomas hadn't expected that. "Really?"

"Yeah. It's half the fun, watching you get more and more desperate..." Alex rubbed his wet fingers together and put the bottle aside. He leaned down to kiss the corner of Thomas's lips. "Besides," he breathed against them. Cool fingers circled his opening to warm up first and Thomas caught his breath. "I wanna make you feel good."

Thomas didn't object. He breathed out slowly as Alex's thick fingers pushed inside. He twitched involuntarily once or twice, then groaned. Alex pushed past the tightness and inside.

God, this already felt incredible, but Thomas couldn't wait to feel *more*. He moved his hips in slow circles, working them with Alex's fingers to let Alex thrust inside in a slow, steady rhythm. Each firm brush of fingers across the sensitive spot inside made his body jolt just a little harder.

By the time Alex pulled his fingers out, Thomas squirmed against the bed with need. His cock throbbed and his head spun. His eyes were closed tightly with pleasure as he dug his fingers into the bed and tried to catch his breath. A packet crinkled, and then there was a muffled gasp and the slick sound of a man stroking himself with a little more lube.

Only the feeling of a warm, thick tip pressing between his legs broke his momentary reverie. Thomas snapped his eyes open to get a good look at Alex's cock as it pushed into him.

"Hnnh," Thomas groaned quietly, running a hand down his own stomach until he circled his fingers around Alex's shaft. He teasingly stroked down to the latex-covered base and squeezed lightly. Alex still

pushed inside, and he finally had to pull his hand away and grab Alex's ass instead.

"You're a little tease," Alex breathed into his ear. His own breathing came in quick, harsh pants already. "I forgot."

"I have my – nnh – moments," Thomas moaned. "Come on. Fuck me."

Alex laughed breathlessly and braced himself on his knees. He laced their hands together once more and thrust in short, sharp movements.

Each time Alex's thick cock sank a little further into him, Thomas groaned his approval. He wasn't quiet in bed; at least, not when he was being pleased this thoroughly.

When Alex's lips met his again, Thomas was glad to kiss back. He lost himself in the moment, pushing up into Alex with each thrust as his head spun with pleasure. His whole body was already tight and hot, but he didn't want to come right away.

He'd waited fucking long enough for this. He had to make it last.

Alex's thrusts into him were quick and deep. Each time he buried himself inside Thomas, Thomas was satiated for a brief moment. How hot and filling and *thick* Alex felt...

The bed creaked under them. Seconds or minutes passed with shared quick breaths and kisses. They brushed their lips along each other's neck, shoulders, face, and most of all, lips. And Alex's touches... Only one of Alex's hands curled tightly against his, their fingers laced together so hard his hands tingled.

The other wandered across Thomas's body, tweaking his nipple and rubbing along his ribs. Alex explored every inch of skin. "I'm gonna come soon," Thomas laughed breathlessly. "Especially if you keep--"

That palm cupped his erection and squeezed hard.

"Hnnh!"

"Oh?" Alex grinned. "If you're gonna come, I'd better get to work..." He was breathless and his cheeks were flushed, his eyes a little too hazy. He was so on edge too.

Thomas wrested one hand free to dig his nails into Alex's back. He groaned loudly when a tight ring of fingers slid down his cock and back up. Alex twisted his hand with each upstroke... His body was tensing, shuddering involuntarily. "Jesus, Alex, I... yes...!"

"Come for me, baby," Alex breathed out. His thumb ran across the

head and around before he pumped his hand up and down again.

While Alex's dick drove into him, his firm and gentle guiding hand pulled Thomas along. His body was already burning with heat at Alex's closeness and the intimacy between them...

Thomas came hard, losing all awareness of anything but the insistent throbbing, spurting pleasure. It started deep in his belly and shuddered through his whole body. Alex kept stroking him with each squirt to coax out the last of his pleasure, and Thomas blushed hard.

His fingers and toes tingled, his muscles clenching and releasing as his mind spun. He couldn't remember the last time it had been this good. When he finally collapsed on the bed again, Thomas pulled his other hand away from Alex's. He cupped the back of his head to kiss him hard, in silent thanks.

"Gorgeous," Alex breathed out, and only now was Thomas aware of how rough and tight his voice was. He must have been barely holding back himself.

Thomas slapped Alex's ass and moaned. "Yes... You're almost there. C'mon, Alex..."

"Thom--" Alex bit back his cry but a strangled groan slipped out regardless. His skin beaded with sweat, cheeks red with exertion. His eyes were hazy, yet fixed entirely on Thomas. Like Thomas was the most beautiful, sexy sight Alex dreamt up to push him over the edge of climax.

Thomas smiled as Alex's hips shuddered and stuttered. Alex buried his face in Thomas's neck with each irregular, deep thrust of his hips. He wrapped his arms around Alex to pull him close, rubbing his hand up and down his back and kissing at his neck. "That's it," Thomas whispered. "Mm, fuck, you feel incredible..."

"S-So do you. Christ," Alex whispered as he gave one or two last little jerky thrusts, then tried desperately to catch his breath. He pushed himself up on an elbow and gazed off, then shook his head as he looked down at Thomas again.

Thomas grinned, letting him pull back and clean up the condom. He just stretched out on the bed, pulling Alex closer again to cuddle into his side.

Alex wrapped one strong arm around Thomas's side to rub his back while he pecked his lips. He was the one to break the silence a few moments later. "Glad you texted me."



“Yeah,” Thomas whispered. His body was warm and satisfied, the urge to sleep tickling at the edges of his mind. He ignored that for now. “Things were pretty hectic. They’re quieter now.”

It was bizarre how comfortable he felt telling Alex all his worries, filling him in on family news. If he was gonna be pissed at Alex, he should’ve been properly distant. But no – he wanted to be close, and it just felt right to talk to him.

“Mmhmm?” Alex murmured. “Your brother doing better? Family all right?”

“Yeah, and yeah. Surgery went great for Cam. Jackson’s business is good. Noah’s doing a couple shows a season, and Chase has a great portfolio going. Everyone’s doing good...”

“And you?”

Thomas gazed into Alex’s eyes, resisting the urge to ask why Alex cared that much. It was enough that he did. “Not bad. Going for a promotion at work, when I can.”

“To what?”

“Whatever I can get,” Thomas smiled. “I didn’t get a degree for nothing.”

“You went to college in Halifax?”

“Mmhmm. Two years in finance.”

Alex smiled, and it was easy to tell he was feeling a bit proud. “You’ll get a promotion sooner or later then. You’re more than qualified.”

“Other than that, not a lot going on with me since we last talked,” Thomas admitted. “Things have been... quiet.”

“Romantically?”

Thomas furrowed his brow. That made it sound like Alex was interested, but that goddamn face of his was so hard to read. Probably harder, now that he was an investigator and a professional liar. “Yeah, there’s nobody right now. If you weren’t such a dick, I’d consider dating you.”

Alex’s face cracked in a smile, and then he snorted with laughter and rolled onto his back. Thomas glowered at how easily he took the accusation, like he didn’t care... or like it was true. “For the record, there’s not much going on with me either. Just... work and seeing family now and then.”

“Sounds boring,” Thomas commented.

“Work's exciting enough. I don't mind boring now and then,” Alex smiled. He sat up and Thomas eased himself up on his elbow, then pushed himself upright, too. “Speaking of which, I should get going. One or two more things to clear up.”

This was it, then. The moment they had to figure out what the fuck they'd do next. Thomas pulled on his jeans, zipping them up with extra care. He watched Alex get dressed in a flash, his hands almost flying up the buttons. It wasn't like he was rushing it; he was just good at this. How many other one-night stands had he had in Ontario? Probably more men than Thomas had taken home in Halifax.

They were quiet while he led Alex downstairs. When they got to the door, Thomas paused to lean in the foyer while Alex put his coat and shoes on.

Thomas's heart drummed when Alex straightened up again slowly. It was hard to tell if it was anxiety, excitement, or both making his heart flutter again. Thomas's eyes fell to Alex's lips.

Alex leaned in slowly, cupping Thomas's cheek and giving him a moment to pull back. When he didn't, Alex kissed him tenderly.

Despite his best efforts, Thomas slumped a little against the wall, letting Alex step closer and kiss him again, pinning him there. They kissed a third time as their thighs nestled and Alex's thumb rubbed his cheek. He could honest-to-God lose himself in this man, the way he kissed him... all gentle lips, warm breaths, teases of teeth and tongue...

Then Alex pulled back. Thomas hastily straightened up again, blinking away the momentary haze. “See you around,” Alex murmured.

Thomas cleared his throat. “See you.” He stepped back while Alex pulled open the door.

Their eyes met for a moment and Alex nodded. Then he was gone, the door closed, and Thomas leaned his head on the wall with a quiet thump.

He hadn't dated a lot of men – just a handful of serious relationships, none of which had lasted more than a few months. Even so, Thomas knew damn well that kiss hadn't been a “goodbye, have a good life” kiss on either of their parts.

What was he supposed to do with this?

Alex

Of course Darren's car wasn't in the apartment parking lot.

Alex thumped his forehead against the wheel. He'd just done a third circuit of the lot to check for the cheating bastard's red Volvo. Well, he co-owned it with his wife, but he'd probably get it in the divorce when it went to court.

There was a fresh dump of a few inches of snow, but it couldn't possibly be one of the cars buried under the whole night's accumulation. Darren couldn't have gotten home before ten. He wasn't in his usual spot, and he hadn't chosen any other spot either. So where was he?

Just as Alex was worrying, he spotted movement from the parking lot entrance and went still. The red car pulled into the lot and into Darren's usual spot while Alex sat in the guest parking space. Alex raised his camera, his heart jolting with anticipation that *something* was going on.

He wasn't wrong. Rather than a late-night grocery run or pizza craving, Darren apparently hadn't been satisfied with Anna. A young redhead was on his arm, dressed like she'd been out at a club – stilettos, short dress, neon paper wristband. To Alex, that band identified which club she'd been at.

“Oh, honey,” Alex whispered, shaking his head as he zoomed in. This one definitely didn't know he was married with the way her arm was wrapped around his. Alex rolled down the window just enough to slip the mic out, then caught a giggle and a snippet of voices.

“I live on the sixth floor... apartment nine...”

Liar. He was on the third floor in apartment one, right over the guest parking spot. From this spot, there was a perfect view up into the bedroom window. The same bedroom Darren shared with his wife when she wasn't away.

“No, I'm just joking. I wanted to see if you'd blush.”

They disappeared inside the building.

Christ, what an idiot. It wasn't just a slip-up or an affair with someone better suited to him – a mistake, but *almost* understandable. That was, if Anna was some horrible controlling woman, which she didn't seem to be.

No, to Darren, this was sex for the sake of getting his dick wet. Alex almost bared his teeth. He set down the microphone, stopped recording, and refocused on the bedroom window. He hated these guys, and he hated having to show their wives the evidence later.

Not that Alex had always been a shining star of morality, but Christ, he'd never knowingly cheated. As a honey trap, it had always been a job done *for* the partner, with limits set by his client. Darren was just playing these women, including his own wife. *That* was an asshole move, and he deserved to lose the Volvo.

Darren didn't even close the damn blinds before pushing his fling's dress up. The bedroom lamp was on, so the silhouettes against the sheer curtains showed everything. Alex recorded visual, though the windows were closed against the January cold. He wasn't going to get any audio. Not that he needed it with video this good.

When they went out of sight, presumably for the bed, he still waited in case there was any more evidence. Now, he had time for his mind to wander.

Thomas had been so good. Way better than he remembered – not that he'd ever let Alex get *that* far before. And suddenly he wanted it now? Alex wasn't complaining. Better late than never. And maybe he'd call him again...

Alex realized that something in his heart was... he didn't want to say *fluttering*, but it was.

He didn't believe in love, really, or even long-term happiness. He'd seen too many couples dissolve. Yet as he waited for more evidence of this woman he hadn't connected with Darren before, he wondered. Maybe he just saw the worst side of things – people sneaking around behind their spouses' backs. Even when he found no evidence of cheating, there was some underlying trust issue. Something always made the client call him in the first place.

He never got hired to spy on *great* marriages or relationships between couples who finished one another's sentences.

Alex was smiling.

"Christ," he muttered, rubbing his face. "It was just a... hookup."

With his ex. The one he'd always had in the back of his mind, whenever he'd dated a man for more than two or three months... The one who'd rejected him when he came back to town. Who had made it clear he could fuck off. Until tonight, when he'd flat-out wanted Alex to fuck him.

And it wasn't just sex. Anyone could see that from a mile off. The chemistry before they'd even touched, the way they'd held each other afterward...

Alex wanted more than Thomas could give him.

Not even an hour later, Alex recorded the other woman getting in a taxi and leaving. He called it quits and headed to bed. He had to talk to Lexy, Darren's poor wife, tomorrow and show her this bullshit.

One thought wouldn't leave his head the whole time. As he walked through the stinging cold to his front door, he wondered: was Thomas the one that got away?

Thomas

Christ.

He couldn't tell his brothers yet.

This was either the best or the stupidest thing he'd done in his life, and Thomas still wasn't sure which.

There was one thing for certain: his idea about getting over Alex by sleeping with him hadn't worked. Instead, Alex was on Thomas's mind even more as he went through the workweek with an eye on Thursday, not Friday.

He was in the bar that Wednesday evening with his brothers and friends. Well, mostly his brothers' friends, though they had become his own over the last year. As he thought, Thomas tuned them out for the most part. He was too busy thinking about the possibilities for tomorrow.

Maybe they'd see each other and there'd be another spark of chemistry.

But...

His stomach twisted to think of it, but maybe that was all Alex had ever wanted.

"Huh? Yeah," Thomas agreed when he heard his name, looking around at the others.

Floyd was chuckling at him. "You're completely out of it, man. You all right?"

Behind the teasing eyes, there was concern from Chase's boss. Floyd owned Chase's tattoo shop, and he'd come around to hang out with the rest of them these days. "Oh, yeah, I'm fine," he assured him.

"You sure?"

Thomas hesitated for a moment, then shook his head with a smile. If he was going to break down and talk to someone, it should be his brothers. Floyd was the friend he most loosely knew. "Yeah, I'm fine," he said. "But thanks."

Floyd nodded, then glanced back at the table. “They went off on a tangent. Ashley thinks hockey came from Scotland. They're Googling it.”

“Oh, Jesus, he challenged Cam?” Thomas laughed. “And Kevin? Good luck.”

Ashley, Ryan, Kevin, and Cam were all hunched around Jackson's phone. Noah and Chase rolled their eyes at each other.

“Fuckin' eh?” Kevin exclaimed when the page loaded, and Thomas laughed quietly. He wasn't particularly close to these guys, but at least he had friends to see every week. He was luckier than most. He tried to pay attention as the argument was won with the power of technology.

Alex

“How did you guys know you were right for each other?”

It was a weird question to ask his parents, but Alex was curious. He'd been thinking more about his ideas around romance and marriage, and the inevitable failures of both. His parents *had* been married for almost three decades now.

“Oh, that's easy,” his father laughed as he leaned back in his chair. “I met your mother and I wanted to pull my hair out right away.”

She rolled her eyes and pretended to throw her newspaper in his direction while Alex laughed. “And I thought he needed swatting like a dog trying to get into the pantry.”

They were being lighthearted, and Alex's heart almost hurt. This kind of love was something totally different from what he saw every day on the job.

It was the kind of tender laughter forged by intimacy that he thought he might have shared for a minute with Thomas...

But that was moving way too fast. He swallowed and refocused on them.

He needed a more serious answer. His dad cleared his throat and straightened up when his mom gave him a stern look.

“I think it's what they always say – we just knew. But there was a lot of work that went in behind the scenes to making it work. Compromises, learning to live with differences. And if those differences had been *too* great...”

“We never would have made it this long,” Mom agreed.

That was a lot more helpful. “What do you mean? Life values?”

“Yes, and plans. We both wanted a kid, and to raise him a certain way. We wanted to live in the same kind of place and share the same kind of values.”

“Things are different for you, though,” Dad spoke up. “I assume you're still dating other men...”



Alex laughed, and so did his parents. "Yeah, that hasn't changed."

"Guys can be a little different, you know. We need a little more time to grow up. You're not even halfway through your twenties. Don't feel pressured to settle down. It was normal while we were young, but you can get away with being single a lot longer, until you find the *right* one."

Alex nodded. "It... wasn't just about me," he laughed, lying through his teeth. "Just this weird case."

"Another cheating one?"

"Yeah." Lexy hadn't let him finish the investigation yet. She wanted more, and it was dragging at his newly-improved mood. There were daily ups and downs with his... whatever his depression was, anyway.

"You need to keep taking those cases?"

Alex winced. He couldn't exactly tell his parents why he had to take every case he was offered: because he'd be broke if he didn't. He didn't have a fallback plan. Nobody in Ontario would hire him for an agency, so he'd had to move out here and start his own. It had come out that he was working in a high-end gay boutique in the day and as a gay men's honey trap at night. The jobs were surprisingly compatible.

That had paid wonderfully, but one day he'd just woken up and realized he didn't like it anymore. Plus, he was struggling even to get private event security jobs for straight people, no longer trusted in his own community. Then, he'd given up and moved back here.

He'd told his parents it was all to move back to Fredericton and be closer to them, of course.

Besides... if it weren't for work, he wouldn't have a reason to get out of bed some days.

"Yeah, my business is still pretty new," he nodded. "I can't afford to be picky until at least the first year's up. I'd rather take this kind anyway. You know, I can validate their suspicions when people never had proof..."

His mother nodded. "It seems like it's hard, though."

"It is. This guy... they're only newlyweds, but he's having an affair with one woman *and* bringing home others."

His mother scoffed. "Now *he* needs smacking with a newspaper. Or something harder."

"Mom!" Alex laughed.

"I know *you* can't, dear. I'm just saying."

His father chuckled. "She's right. Not all of us are like that. If you're worried about finding your own--"

"Nah," Alex groaned, but he was paying close attention.

--all I'm saying is, keep holding on. There might be fewer of you out there, but you'll find one."

"And he'll be the right one, more importantly."

Alex smiled, rising to his feet. "Okay, okay," he laughed. "I gotta get going soon. Thanks, Mom, Dad."

"Anytime. Come over for supper again soon," Dad told him. "Don't burn out."

"I won't."

After his usual goodbyes, Alex sat in the car for a few minutes to warm it up. He leaned against the window.

They were right: there *were* some different men. Thomas, for one. Thomas had been loyal almost to a fault; it would have been much easier to dump him all those years ago if he hadn't been. But being dumped had to hurt even more, so he didn't try to summon up too much sympathy for himself.

He'd been right to look for a relationship that had what he needed, but not in the way he went about it. If he ever dumped someone again, it would be face-to-face, not over the phone. That memory made him cringe.

"Yeah, I *was* that dick, kind of," Alex muttered. Maybe they were right and it did take men a little longer to grow up and be ready to settle down. Maybe he was just getting to that stage now.

Thomas was two years younger. Was he almost ready?

If not... could Alex wait?

His heart raced. He'd never considered that question when it came to any other guy. The fact that he was even thinking about that told him that something was different.

But he couldn't dwell on it. Thomas didn't want more with him.

Alex tried not to think the word *yet* at the end of that sentence. He

pulled away from the curb to drive home to his apartment.

## Thomas

If Thomas spent extra time ironing his shirt for Thursday, he wouldn't admit it. When Thursday came around, he brushed his teeth on his lunch break. The time seemed to drag by as the hour approached two o'clock.

Alex was due any time.

Naturally, Thomas was in the middle of serving a client when the handsome man stepped into the bank. A cool breeze blew through the lobby when the door opened, ruffling the waiting area brochures.

The client was slowly entering their PIN, and Thomas had just a second to look up and make eye contact with Alex.

Alex was looking for him, too, his gaze scanning the row of desks before his eyes lit upon Thomas's face.

They shared a look for a moment, their eyes meeting as a slow smile crept across Alex's face. That same slow, charming smile, but there was more sincerity today. Thomas just hoped none of the other tellers were looking between them. The chemistry between them felt like a lethal charge in the air.

*Oh, Christ.* Thomas's heart downright fluttered, but he ignored it. He wasn't forgiving Alex yet, however sweet he'd been in bed. He drew his lips down and nodded briskly, then returned his attention to the client. Perhaps he paid her a little too much attention, ignoring where Alex went.

Alex would never commit to one guy, would he? And Thomas's family wouldn't approve. Not just because it was Alex, but Jackson always said exes should stay exes.

This thing between them... it was just a slip-up, a mistake Thomas thought would be logical. It had only complicated things.

Thomas's phone vibrated quietly and he ignored it until the last customer was out of sight. Only then were they allowed to check their phones. Well, they were discouraged, but there were slow days where hardly any customers came in. The tellers here had insisted that it was

this or Facebook games.

It was a text from Alex.

*You look beautiful today.*

A blush crept up his cheeks as he scanned the room, trying to look casual. Alex was sitting in the waiting area for bank officer appointments, side-on to him. He had one arm stretched along the back of the comfy leather couch, his gaze fixed on the offices just beyond.

He tapped out a quick response.

*Fuck off, you. You know that was one time.*

Still, heat crawled up his cheeks and through his stomach. He burned with the desire for Alex to give him another sly look. It made him shudder.

He had to put up walls *now*, or Alex was going to break his heart again.

A minute later, Alex checked his phone. Thomas saw even from this distance and angle that Alex was smiling. Alex didn't look around at him, which was actually more maddening.

Thomas had no idea why his heart was racing so much. He wasn't the type to flirt by playing hard-to-get. What had gotten into him, apart from the obvious joke?

As Thomas tidied up his desk, keeping Alex in his peripheral vision, Alex stood up and stretched. The self-assured man wandered around to pick up brochures from each table and scan them. He looked left and right, probably for a bathroom, before taking a quick wander down an aisle.

*Wrong way*, Thomas thought. He wanted to gloat at Alex getting turned around when he was proud of being so good with directions and building layouts. But no, he wasn't going to interact.

It took Thomas a minute to realize Alex hadn't come back.

*Fuck. He's investigating. Not in my workplace.* Thomas's blood ran hot with annoyance. He hadn't come to make an appointment, or... see him. No, that was a stupid thought, but the synchronicity of bumping into Alex *had* been a little hard to believe.

He stood up, moving the bar across his counter and glancing at his coworkers. Chris and Georgie were both there to handle any

unexpected rushes. “Be right back.”

“Yep,” Chris said without taking his eyes off his phone screen while Georgie nodded.

Thomas strode across the marble floor of the lobby. His shoes clicked against the tiles as he made his way directly to the offices. Maggie wasn't at the desk; she was probably fighting the copy machine again today.

Alex was lurking near the offices, turning this way and that. He looked lost despite how small the maze of cubicles and offices really was.

“Hello,” Thomas greeted, his voice clipped. He approached Alex like any other client – albeit with a bit more sternness.

Alex had a moment of looking guilty before smiling. “Sorry, I got a bit lost.” He turned slowly away from Anna's office and raised a hand.

Then, Thomas's breath caught in his throat.

Anna's office blinds were closed, but one of the blinds around chest level was ajar. Through that, he caught a glimpse of something he really *hadn't* wanted to see. Anna was facing away, but a guy sat on her desk, his shirt unbuttoned and fingers digging into the desk. Including his ring finger, with a ring on it.

“What the--” he cut himself off, his gaze flickering away as he blushed hard. “Is she seeing some...” he trailed off. Alex was an investigator. He'd needed an appointment at this time. He was lingering outside this office.

*Ohhh, no.*

Even if the ethics code didn't prohibit this, basic workplace decency did.

Alex didn't answer. He shrugged. “I'd better sit down and wait for... Lisa, I think it was.”

“Yes.” Thomas stiffly led Alex back to the waiting area without answering. Alex fidgeted with his phone in his breast pocket.

Just before they emerged, Alex touched Thomas's arm slightly to stop him. He kept his voice to a murmur. “See? My work *can* be good.”

Thomas couldn't disagree; lending to a client you were cheating with was a major breach of the ethics code. There was no way management knew about this. Anna wouldn't be employed if they'd known.

Was he supposed to tell? If he didn't... If anyone ever investigated, he couldn't say he hadn't known. For god's sake, Alex could be investigating that very moment. And more than that, it was about doing the right thing. He just wasn't sure whether that was what he thought it was.

Alex sank into the couch again. "Thank you for your assistance." Maggie was coming back with Lisa, who smiled in greeting to Alex. He rose to his feet again. "Ah, hello."

Unseen, Thomas walked quietly back to his workstation.

He wasn't a snitch, but he also wasn't dishonest... and there might be major fraud happening. Or just one little house loan. No, one loan wasn't better than ten or twenty. His head spun.

This wasn't how he'd expected Thursday to go, but he was still glad he'd dressed up neatly. Alex's suit had been freshly-pressed today. In thinking that, Thomas dared to think he wouldn't have been out of place on Alex's arm.

*Not the time.*

But if he reported and the wrong person heard, if Anna *was* being protected by people higher up... Thomas might be out of a job, and without a reference for another.

And he couldn't afford that.

He had some big decisions to make.

Alex

Any day Alex got home early was a great day. He had the evidence Lexy wanted that there *was* an affair with one woman. He'd still have to go out on Saturday to catch them romancing each other on the trails, though. Lexy was obsessed with proving that this wasn't a one-time mistake.

From what she'd said, the asshole had always excused himself by saying it wasn't anything serious, just self-control slips. Alex hoped catching Darren a couple times with the same woman would blow a hole in Lexy's ability to forgive him for those "mistakes" he kept making.

He settled down by grabbing a beer from the fridge and chilling out in front of the TV. There was a marathon of some show about hot lawyers, so he watched that.

A little later, Alex ate a microwave supper he'd grabbed on his way home, and then returned to the marathon. He had a slight interest in the exploits of the characters, at least one of whom was *clearly* fucking gay. The TV would never show that, though.

Alex chilled out, doing as little as possible until he got a text from Thomas that evening.

*Call me?*

He grinned and licked his teeth, stretching out again to enjoy the moment. The same man who'd told him to fuck off that afternoon was all hot and cold. Clearly he was getting to Thomas somehow. It was kind of enjoyable since Thomas had always been able to keep him at arms-length.

"Hello, Thomas," Alex greeted once his ex answered. He knew he sounded a little smug, but he couldn't help it.

Thomas sounded annoyed. "Look, this isn't another..."

"Booty call?"

"Shut up. I'm only calling because I want to know about your work."



Alex straightened up. That was less fun. He rubbed his hand back through his hair and muted the TV. "Go on."

"Are you bringing what we saw to the bank's attention?"

Alex paused, considering how to answer this. Thomas knew who he'd been investigating, but not why. He could have been working for the bank, a partner if Anna one, or Darren's wife as he actually was. Thomas wouldn't be able to guess which, and he had to keep it that way.

"I can't. This is evidence in an ongoing investigation."

Thomas paused for a few long moments. "Ah." He sounded frustrated. "Right."

"Anyone who sees impropriety in the workplace can approach their supervisor," Alex said mildly, tugging his jeans and scratching his thigh. "Naturally."

"Ah... Right." Thomas paused for a few long moments and Alex let him stew in silence before he spoke up again. "I do approve of catching fraudsters and cheaters and stuff, I guess. It's just that we were on the receiving end of it before."

Alex hadn't expected any forgiveness, even unspoken. "Oh? I'm glad you see a different side now."

"But you *really* shouldn't have crept on Cam if you still wanted anything to do with me," Thomas told him. "You had to know he wouldn't like that."

"Yeah, I... had some warning he might not take it well." Alex had been told that by the guys who'd hired him. He'd had an idea anyway, from his own general knowledge of Thomas's brothers. "I was wrong to put anyone you love on surveillance. I hesitated before taking the job, but... I should have turned it down. I know you might not trust me again and that's okay. I just... needed the money, man."

"Damn right that's okay," Thomas told him firmly. "I get needing the money... a little more now." Alex frowned, concerned for a brief moment before Thomas went on. "But I already didn't trust you."

Alex's annoyance slipped through for the first time in a long time. He was used to being utterly professional and keeping his feelings under wraps. But Thomas *kept* poking that damn wound. "Still banging on about me leaving for Toronto?"

"Excuse me?"

“You were the one who didn't want to be out,” Alex pointed out mildly. He knew it would piss Thomas off, but he couldn't help saying it. “I warned you I needed to be public if I was gonna date you exclusively. And you knew I was graduating and leaving.”

“So it's my fault now?”

Alex pictured that indignant face. “It would have happened one way or another if you never got the balls to come out. I saved us the agony later.” The phone line went dead; he knew it before he even tested. “Thomas? You there?”

He laughed quietly and tossed his phone on the couch. It was damn hard to get Thomas worked up at all, let alone to the point where he'd hang up on him.

As much as he tried to ignore it, remorse crept in moments later, though. Provoking Thomas also wasn't much fun. He liked the adrenaline rush of getting one over on someone, sure. But this was the guy he wanted to rekindle something with...

It was a stupid call, and Alex regretted it within ten seconds. He turned the TV up again, letting Thomas take the space he needed. When he was ready to talk, he'd call back – maybe next week, maybe never.

It was harsh, but it was the truth; he'd needed someone he could be out with, and Thomas hadn't been that guy. Nonetheless, he knew he could have put it a little better. Okay, a lot better.

That was a truth Alex was reluctant to admit: he was a hard man to be around. The lower his mood, the more he poked and prodded people, and damn it, he didn't even know why.

Probably another depression symptom. He made a face. *I'll make an appointment someday.*

And Thomas was right – he had to look harder at the cases he took from now on, and maybe at how much of a dick people saw him as. He was never gonna get a boyfriend if he kept this act up. A bad boy was only good for one thing, and Thomas had already gotten that.

*Maybe I'll make an appointment tomorrow.*

Alex rolled over to grab his phone and dial the doctor's office. It was way past closing, but they'd get the message and call him back.

“Hello. I'm looking to make an appointment. My number is...” Alex tried to sound perky as he left the message, then pressed *hang up* and

put the phone down again.

If Alex ever wanted more... he had to give more, too.

Cam

Mom and Dad were in the kitchen, and Jackson was helping them wash up. Cameron had Thomas alone in the living room. He intended to take advantage of the moment's peace and quiet. After all, a little birdie had told him that Thomas might *not* be opposed to dating right now.

He and Noah had discussed the possibility of setting Thomas up with someone – one of their mutual friends or someone new.

But first, it only seemed right to chat to him about it.

“So, Valentine's Day is only next month,” Cam tried, stretching his legs out as he sprawled on the couch.

Thomas gave him a disbelieving look. “That's about the least subtle way you could have put it.”

Cameron laughed and rubbed his face. “Yeah. So, you planning on getting a move on before then? Or are you waiting for the perfect person to slide down the sidewalk into your lap?” It was possible Thomas was suffering from unrealistic standards, after all. It was pretty hard to beat Noah and Chase as being the perfect boyfriends. Noah a little more perfect, though.

“Mm,” Thomas glanced out into the backyard, then looked back at Cam. “What I told you about after the barbecue in August, that kind of panned out, but kind of didn't.”

*Vague.* Still, at least Thomas was talking, and Cam wanted to encourage it. Maybe he was shy about talking about a girlfriend when everything else in the family was about boyfriends. Cam didn't want him hiding away his personal life. Or, of course, it could be a boyfriend...

“You ever call them back, then?”

Thomas was quiet.

“You gotta take initiative sometimes,” Cameron elbowed Thomas. “Dude, it's been months.”

“That's what Noah said.”

“Aha, you've been talking to love guru Noah but not your own brother?” Cam feigned being wounded. “Or even Jackson, the lump...”

Thomas was frowning. “Yeah.”

“Why not?”

“You can drop this subject anytime.”

Cam raised his eyebrow. “Why?”

Thomas turned to look him dead in the eye. “Just mind your own business. I asked you back then not to interfere. So don't interfere.”

That was about as close as Thomas ever got to yelling at someone. Cameron instantly put up his hand and nodded. “Yeah. Sure. Sorry, man.”

Thomas's shoulders sank and he rolled them a little, then offered a smile instead. “Yeah.”

The silence between them was tense, interrupted only by clattering and laughter from the kitchen.

Cam snorted and poked his finger in Thomas's direction, waving it around his chest. “You've got a little pent-up...”

Thomas slapped his hand away and punched his shoulder. “Says the one who was grouchy for *months* last year.”

“Well, they fixed *that*, at least,” Cam smirked just to make Thomas groan. Being able to have great, rowdy, red-blooded sex with Noah again was a treat. Cam had noticed that he was a lot calmer in general, so Thomas wasn't wrong. Maybe Thomas needed to get laid, too. “You know, you can take up a sport,” Cam suggested.

“What?” Thomas had never really *done* sports. “Like what? Hockey?”

“Fuck, no. They'd crush you,” Cam laughed. “You're living in the capital of outdoor sports. Snowshoeing or skiing or something. We have enough of the shit around to do something with. Arctic ice running.”

“Is that a sport?”

“It should be. That'd be hilarious. Even more injuries than hockey, I bet.”

Thomas rolled his eyes but still smiled. “Fine. I've been thinking about

going out this weekend and doing something just to..." he trailed off for a moment, then finished, "do something."

*Get your mind off something?* Ooh, Cam was intrigued. He knew better than to push Thomas's buttons again so soon. "Yeah, you should. Some quiet time alone might be good. Or around other people. You spend enough damn time alone."

"I have friends. At the bank, and the board game cafe when I go."

"Like once a month, when you're not reading the latest... I don't know, horror-thriller thing."

Thomas shoved him. "I hate horror. You should know that."

"Whatever the hell you read," Cam grinned. "Nerd."

Thomas hauled himself to his feet and shook his head. "We should see if they need any help. God, you're like the cat who got the canary since surgery. I think you need a little less activity."

Cam laughed richly. "No way. I waited fuckin' long enough," he shook his head. "Hey, maybe sports will help you meet someone and get a little *more* activity. Meet me in the middle," he wriggled his eyebrows.

"I'm ignoring you until further notice," Thomas shook his head. Cam laughed again and followed his little brother to the kitchen. They'd all find out what Thomas was hiding eventually. Maybe before his deathbed, Cam thought with a grin. He had to open up *someday*, to someone. Hopefully they'd be included.

Alex

“So, I need to go up around that way? Is there anything that way?”

Alex knew damn well that there were warm-up cabins in both directions from the trailhead. He just needed to confirm which trail the romantic couple had chosen for their planned illicit rendezvous.

He was pretty sure he knew which direction they'd gone, but he had to be sure. Skiing in the wrong direction would be a pretty big fuck-up.

“Well,” the ski rental guy said, rubbing his chin, “there's a cabin both ways, if you get that far out. But for your first time on skis in a while, you might not.” Alex might have feigned a little less knowledge than he had to flirt more with the guy. Nothing wrong with that, even if it was idle interest.

It was weird only to have a passing interest in the guy before losing interest again. His days of eying men who walked into the high-end boutique where he'd started his career, and of getting at least three numbers a shift, were over.

“Oh,” Alex laughed. “I guess you must have regulars who can. Do they come out on weekends, or is it amateurs like me?”

“There's one couple who seem talented. They came this morning and headed up to the Sycamore cabin. You might want to go to the Beech cabin...” the guy hinted with a rueful laugh.

“Is-- wait, isn't that against the rules or something?”

“They look like a new couple, I don't recognize them. The regulars know better,” the rental guy grinned. “When a marathon skier crashes in with snot running down his face and interrupts--”

“Oh, *Jesus*,” Alex laughed, holding up a hand. “That was an image I didn't want.” He almost doubled over on his poles, trying desperately to forget it. “Fuck.” The guy was leaning on the table as he laughed, too. “They've never been out before and they made it there? I might have a shot.”

“This is... maybe the third time I've seen them, but yeah, they found it

easy enough. They said last time they enjoyed it..." the guy ruefully smiled. "That trail is flatter and a bit faster."

"Okay. I might give it a shot. I'll just knock before I enter." Alex winked, pushing himself gently backward on his skis. "Thanks a lot."

The guy was cute enough, bearded and young with dark brown eyes, but so not Alex's type. Nothing like Thomas, either.

"You're welcome. Enjoy your afternoon."

Alex turned like a starfish, one step at a time, until he faced the trailhead. He glided away across the snow in small, testing strides.

It was easier than he remembered, but he'd strain some muscles he wasn't used to targeting in the gym. He had to pace himself to make it all the way to the cabin. Alex desperately wanted to gather that last bit of evidence for Lexy and wrap up his case.

It only took a few glides from foot to foot as he settled into the easy, smooth rocking rhythm. The rental guy had waxed them with exactly the right stuff. He had just enough grip when he needed it, but enough glide to skate across the top of the snow. He'd make better time than he could in the classic tracks with his skis parallel and his arms working too hard.

With leg muscles like his, he kept his strides under control. It was a joy to skate across the crisp, squeaking, white groomed trail until the main cabin vanished behind him.

The most exertion wasn't even in his legs. It was in his arms each time he dug his pole tips into the snow and bent. He propelled himself along as his skis formed a V enveloping the direction he wanted to travel. He rocked back onto his right foot without poling each time, then dug his poles in again for his left foot.

For extra speed, he *could* double-pole and propel himself along on both left and right strides. He didn't have to go that fast right now, though. He'd watched them set off just a few minutes ago and they couldn't be a lot faster than him.

The trees closed in around him within minutes and he was utterly alone. Well, almost alone. Birdsong reached his ears, from winter birds braving warmer weather to forage. Probably partridges or jays. The tree boughs hung heavy with snow, a few bright berries peeking out between the lumps of snow and icicles. The last freezing rain had at least given a great, crisp surface to the snow that made skiing easier. It dragged trees down sometimes in the dead of winter, so it



wasn't always great.

Oddly enough, this was the most peaceful he remembered being since moving here from the hustle of Toronto's suburbs. The air bit at his nose and lungs, but he wrapped his scarf a little tighter. He clutched his ski poles tightly to keep propelling himself forward.

The solitude was kind of nice, even if part of him wanted to share it with someone – to point out pretty Christmas card scenes or split snacks with. And if that someone was Thomas in his idle daydreams, nobody had to know.

Thomas still hadn't called him, but it had only been two days since their Thursday evening call. He expected it would take another day or two for Thomas to cool off again. When he did, Alex would apologize. He *had* been in the wrong, at least partly, for that conversation.

But that would happen in time. Right now, he was just a few easy miles away from nailing this bastard exactly how Lexy wanted, getting a great paycheck, and helping her get the confidence to confront him with the damning evidence he was so sloppily giving to him on a platter.

It was hard to say which gave him more pleasure: the beauty and solitude of the woods or getting to ski on the clock. Maybe both.

He loved his life sometimes.

## Thomas

He couldn't possibly need anything else. He had ski pants, a sturdy waterproof windbreaker, good waterproof gloves, a warm toque, a variety of snacks, a water bottle, an emergency kit...

"I'm only going skiing, not mountain climbing," Thomas muttered. Still, he wasn't used to outdoor sports, let alone by himself. If he went out on a skidoo, it was with someone he knew; if he snow shoed, he was reluctant. Skiing was much easier because he could glide. It was like skating on top of the snow.

Last time he'd skied was during his last year of high school. It was a senior class activity to keep them all from drinking and being irresponsible teens. Not that *that* had worked.

He still remembered nearly breaking limbs racing down hills way too fast. Then there were make-out sessions behind the cabins when kids thought the supervising teacher wasn't looking. Most memorable, perhaps, was the heckling when any of them fell, even though they were all just as bad.

He wasn't sure he remembered all the basics. Thomas just hoped someone there would be able to at least tell him if he was screwing up too badly. He wanted a workout, so at least poor skiing technique would burn even more energy.

Thomas's mind wandered a little as he parked in the ski club lot. He stubbornly kept himself from thinking about the man who'd been on his mind for days now. Alex could be a real idiot sometimes, and not talking to him for a few days seemed to smarten him up most of the time.

Taking some space also kept Thomas's nerves cool. He hated losing control, even for a small outburst like snapping at Cam the other day. But that was another good reason to exercise a little more. Burn off the energy and frustration, and... hell, maybe he'd meet someone who caught his eye.

Maybe.

The actual rental took a few minutes of shuffling around on skis and

trying out different pole lengths.

"I'm not sure I remember how," he admitted with a sheepish chuckle. "It's been years."

"Oh, you're doing just fine." The bearded young guy in hipster flannel plaid nodded as Thomas slowly scooted his feet back and forth. "It's just one foot in front of the other."

"What's the quietest trail? Seems busy today." Thomas had parked in the closer lot and that had been nearly filled. He'd probably nabbed that last parking spot from some early-morning skier who'd already come and gone.

"Probably one of the outer loops. A few people went up that way," the man gestured with a gloved hand. "I'd rather see you go on that trail since there's others out there in case you run into trouble. Nobody's been out the other way yet this morning."

Thomas appreciated his concern. "Thanks," he nodded. "I'll do that."

He set off slowly, not overeager to show off and fall on his face. He was glad he didn't embarrass himself before getting to the trailhead, at least. Once he slotted his skis into the tracks, he felt a little more stable. The ridges on the bottom of the skis helped him stay upright, but they couldn't do much. The tracks gave him an inflated sense of confidence.

He set off at a slow stride, his legs moving awkwardly at first in the strange shuffling movements. It took him several strides to find a good pace for his feet, and another several hundred feet for his poles.

It was a beautiful day, at least. It was warming up, some of the snow that warmed under direct light dropping off branches in clumps. It wasn't hot enough that the snow was wet and sticky, though; there was still an icy layer that made him glide along with relative ease.

This seemed way easier than Thomas remembered. As the cabin disappeared from sight and nature enveloped him, he pushed himself a little harder to get his heart pounding.

Peace, fresh air, and exercise: maybe this would be just the ticket.

---

Oh, fuck, he was sweating like a pig and his lungs burned with the cold air. His cheeks were so cold that he barely felt when his nose needed to be dabbed. Getting tissues out of his pocket was an

elaborate exercise. He let go of his poles, wrested his hand from one of the straps, unzipped his pocket through thick gloves, finally got a tissue out and blew his nose, then reversed the whole process.

And he was drinking more water than ever. Despite being surrounded by the frozen stuff, he couldn't seem to drink enough. Plus, he'd already stopped for a few snacks.

He wanted to reach the cabin ahead – he just had no idea how far away it was. He finally came across a sign. *Another four kilometers?* Oh, fuck, he was never gonna make it back to the main cabin at this rate let alone another eight kilometers.

Thomas blew out a little sigh, wiping his forehead with his sleeve. He'd at least crest the next hill and emerge from the tree line. If he spotted the cabin ahead, maybe he could get to it.

He double-poled down the hill. In his exhaustion, he realized a little too late he'd misjudged the angle of the slope. It curved around a small hill and steepened almost immediately. By the time he saw the angle down, it was all he could do to try to bring his toes together. *Brake... I need brakes...!*

The adrenaline rushed to Thomas's head as he sucked his breath in. It was way too late to slow down. There weren't tracks on a hill this steep since it was safer to take the hill on the bare slope. They wouldn't have saved him, though.

“Oh, shit--”

Another skier was at the bottom of the hill. He was going to collide with him. He tried to skid sideways, turning like a downhill skier might to redirect himself. The move upset his precarious balance, and he didn't stand a chance against the slick icy surface and gravity together.

He tumbled hard, hitting the ground as his skis and poles immediately tangled.

“Shit, ow-- oof!” As he flipped into the deep snow and one arm caught in the trees. Then there was a *snap*.

*Christ, don't let that be my arm or leg.*

A second or two later he came to a stop, skidding around ninety degrees from where he'd gotten stuck in the tree. As the adrenaline faded just enough to become aware of his body, it was obvious that it hadn't been his own limb.

Thank god for that.

That left him with three main problems: that had been his ski pole snapping; he was a ridiculously long way away from the cabin; and the skier now just a few feet away looked horribly, impossibly familiar.

"Oh, god. It can't be." Thomas closed his eyes for a moment while his body shivered with the adrenaline coursing through him. Of course he'd have his near-death experience while *he* was right there.

But when he opened his eyes again, he shook his head. Thomas's eyes didn't lie. Even in a stylish white winter toque with a bobble on the top, the sexy man wearing that smirk had a smart mouth on him. He wasn't giving him a moment's rest.

"Taking the shortcut?"

"Fuck you, Alex." Thomas sneered for a moment, fighting to get his hands out from the ski pole straps. He yanked one out, then the other, and wrestled his skis free.

"I've never seen anyone fall that spectacularly. Are you okay?"

Alex smoothly sank to his knees sideways on the snow, not even tangling his skis in the process. He wore a look of concern that touched Thomas as much as it pissed him off.

"I'm fine," Thomas muttered, his emotions settling down. It was probably just as well he wasn't alone. If he *had* been injured alone, this would be a lot worse. "Just my pride... and that pole. Oh, man."

"It's a friggin' miracle you didn't break a leg. In downhill skis, you definitely would have."

"Thanks for that helpful commentary," Thomas snipped. He pushed his way back to his feet, his hands and knees sinking further into the snow. "There's a reason I don't go down hills on bikes, either."

Alex held back his clear urge to laugh and reached out a hand. Swallowing his pride for a moment, Thomas took the hand and Alex pulled him up to his feet. "The offer of mouth-to-mouth still stands," Alex teased.

"I wouldn't be caught dead kissing you." Thomas ignored Alex, stooping over carefully to grab one pole. He waddled up the hill a few paces for the broken pole.

"Do you want to borrow mine? They're taller since they're made for skate-skiing."

Thomas snorted. "Of course you don't ski like the rest of us plebes, either."

Alex looked startled, then laughed. "No, I – Thomas. I took lessons before. There's nothing wrong with the classic style. It can be very graceful and... speedy."

"Not the way I do it."

Alex laughed again. "Okay. Well, you're honest."

"No sense pretending I'm a star." Thomas hid his smile.

"I'll keep you company and make sure you don't break the other pole."

Despite his irritation, Thomas was surprisingly amenable to the idea. Somehow, the banter between them brightened him up more than if it had been some random stranger. "Okay. If you must. I was just heading back to the lodge anyway."

Alex nodded. "Me, too. I didn't know you skied." He pulled away and skated to the other side of the hill, then dug the edges of his skis into the snow in a V pattern to climb up the hill.

Still out of breath, almost dizzy from the adrenaline of the fall, Thomas followed. He had a harder time without being able to dig one of his poles in for support. He was clutching the broken pieces of the other pole in his left hand while trying to anchor himself with one pole.

It was a struggle, but he got to the top of the hill and scooted over into the tracks again.

"Do you want to swap skis?" Alex offered. "It might have to be boots too, though. I think we were the same shoe size..."

Thomas hadn't expected Alex to remember that detail. He hoped his warm cheeks were already flushed red from the cold air. "I, uh... nah. I'll manage."

"Okay. Let me know if you do."

He might have laughed earlier, but Alex was showing sweet concern now. Thomas's hackles settled as he set off in a slow, steady rhythm.

After a couple minutes, he had the best rhythm he could manage going. It was a bit like hobbling over the ice rather than the smooth glide he'd managed before, but it was something.

"What were you doing out here?" he asked Alex. "Working?"

Alex snorted. "I do take *a little* time off, you know," he grinned. "I often get home from work early."

"Really? I thought you'd be all... late nights."

"Nah. Not around here. A lot of the time, surveillance is best done in the early morning. Catching people going to work... stray pets are active in the dawn and dusk hours..."

"You find people's pets? Jeez, you're trying to be a good guy now," Thomas snorted.

"I'm trying. I know I've been a dick sometimes... am *still* a dick sometimes..."

Thomas nodded. "But I've seen a change in you already. Overall."

"Oh, yeah?" Alex brightened up. It was harder work for him to skate-ski slowly besides Thomas. It would have been easier to go fast and travel the distance with each glide, but he still did it effortlessly. He *did* have a pretty toned body, after all.

*Oh, god, don't think of that here.*

Thomas tried to think of some other topic of conversation, but none came to mind. He just stayed quiet for now, conserving his energy. Now and then, Alex caught his gaze.

*This is nice. Just us, alone, quiet, not pushing each other's buttons... I could do this again.*

The thought was as thrilling as it was scary.

Alex

It was hard not to laugh at poor Thomas's efforts to ski. He looked like he hadn't been on skis for years, if ever, and he didn't quite know how to compensate with his other arm. He dragged himself along more than pushing, but Alex resisted the urge to critique his technique. That probably wasn't what he wanted just now.

After a few more minutes of quiet exertion, when they both slowed down for a drink of water, Alex looked at him. *Do or die*. This was the bit of trying to be a better person that was most uncomfortable. It never got easier. "I'm sorry I pissed you off the other day. I shouldn't have said those things..."

"That's half an apology, but I'll take it," Thomas snorted. "I shouldn't have hung up on you."

"No, that was cute," Alex teased. "I used to do that to you... a lot. Try to piss you off. God, I'm sorry for teenage me."

Thomas laughed now, the sound more relaxed and genuine. "Yeah, but I liked the bad boys." He tilted his bottle back to down some water.

Mm, the outline of his throat bobbing as he swallowed... "You still like 'em?" Alex winked. Before Thomas answered, he added, "I know you're not looking to date me again or anything. I'm just flirting for the sake of it. If you wanna keep this... whatever we've had... to one hookup, that's fine."

Thomas looked startled as he tucked his water bottle in his jacket pocket and pulled his glove on again. "Oh. I see."

Jesus. Alex had almost forgotten... it was so hard to read him sometimes. "No, tell me what you really think. I've always admired you for having your boundaries, man. Nobody ever made you do shit if you didn't wanna do it," Alex told him. "It's something I'd look for in a boyfriend now, even though I got annoyed by it then."

"Would you look for a closeted boyfriend now?"

Alex glanced over sharply at Thomas. Was that a proposal or an



honest question? He drew a breath, then let it out and nodded. "Yeah. I better get why some people do it now."

"What changed your mind?"

Alex set himself into motion, going as slow as possible while Thomas got up to speed. "Uh... working in security and investigation. I see a lot of unhappy couples and families. Chase, for example."

"Ah." Thomas cast a quick look at him. "You're looking for a boyfriend now? I didn't think you were the type to do boyfriends. You *barely* did when we were together."

"Believe it or not," Alex laughed. The squeak and rush of the snow beneath their skis was a beautiful backdrop to their conversation. Somehow, it soothed Alex's anxious nerves. "I went a couple years without dating guys for more than, what, two months?"

"That's not even a relationship, that's an extended fling."

Alex laughed. "Yeah, I know that now. But I dunno. Things are different since moving back here." He spoke carefully, not sure what Thomas was trying to coax out of him. His heart thrummed with nervous anticipation. "I just..." he trailed off.

*No, don't say it.*

If Thomas gave him an answer on whether he wanted a relationship again, Alex would tell him the gods-honest truth. He missed Thomas like hell and hookups with others weren't doing anything for him.

But he didn't want to push Thomas's comfort, and Thomas did seem uncomfortable. Alex wasn't sure if it was strictly at the idea of dating him, or men in general, but he was being awfully distant.

"Hm?"

"Nothing," Alex brightly answered. "I just saw a bird, I think."

"Oh, congratulations. You're a bird-spotter now?"

Alex laughed. "Smart-ass. It was a blue jay. It was cute. I'm not pointing out any more birds if you're just gonna make fun of me."

"No, point out the birds, please," Thomas groaned. "I'm sorry."

"Fine."

The mood was light between them as Thomas glanced at him. Those eyes were always perceptive. "If you were about to talk about us, I'm ready for that."

Alex's lips parted in a quick, small "O" shape – he knew his mouth was hanging open, and not just from exertion. His ski nearly slipped sideways as he lost concentration. He pulled it back toward his body and smoothly glided. "Oh. Right. Um, I was just gonna say I really liked what we did the other night."

"Me, too," Thomas answered. "I thought it was one last fling, but it might be... the opposite."

Yes! Alex didn't even know why he was so excited at this admission. It wasn't like Thomas wanted to be his boyfriend instantly or anything. He didn't even know for sure he wanted Thomas to be!

But this was progress: for the first time, they were discussing their relationship like mature adults. And to Alex's surprise, it felt good.

---

There was nobody else in the main cabin – just the employees outside taking back the ski rentals. Once they ditched the skis and Thomas paid extra for his broken pole, they headed inside. They stripped off their ski jackets and pants to warm up for a few minutes before driving back home.

There were saunas and one outdoor hot tub, too. Alex was hardly prepared for Thomas in a swimsuit though – or even naked. He wasn't sure he wouldn't channel Darren and Anna's recklessness.

That last bit of evidence – video of them – was all he needed. Lexy would have her suspicions confirmed. Anna was more than a one-time fling. Darren wouldn't be able to talk his way out of it with the usual excuses.

Alex had to write up his report, but that could wait. Someone more important was here, sitting next to him on the bench in front of the wood stove.

Their knees grazed as Thomas stretched out, then placed a hand gently on Alex's knee.

A smile tugged at Alex's lips, and he turned his head to watch Thomas. He stretched his arm along the bench behind Thomas's back, then loosely wrapped it around his shoulders.

Logs crackled inside the glass-fronted fireplace as they watched the sparks fly and embers glow. The warmth was intense – almost unbearable – but Alex was hardly going to move.

“Would you drive back with me?” Thomas asked. “In convoy, of course. I want to talk somewhere private.”

“Okay. Want to come over to my place?”

Thomas nodded. “Yeah. You'll have to lead, though. I don't know where it is.”

“No problem.” Alex couldn't look away from Thomas now. His cheeks were still flushed adorably red, his lips parted and wet and kissable.

Thomas's eyes had wandered down to his lips, too. He checked out around them, which Alex knew meant he was thinking about it.

“C'mon,” Alex murmured. He leaned in to peck Thomas's lips and Thomas tilted his head so their lips perfectly met. After one sweet kiss, Alex pulled back. He rose, then offered a hand to Thomas to pull him to his feet for the second time that day.

Thomas took his hand and didn't let go as they walked down to the parking lot together.

Alex waited until Thomas was behind him before pulling out of the lot. His heart pounded with a kind of nervous excitement he hadn't felt in a long time.

He wasn't gloating at the possibility that Thomas wanted a repeat of the other day. Instead, he anticipated talking about their relationship. Hell, Alex worried that Thomas would slip away at an intersection instead of following him back to the city.

Something had changed in the way Alex looked at others – a new respect, perhaps. There was no more running from inconvenient situations; this time, Thomas had just as much power to break Alex's heart. And for the first time, Alex was okay with that vulnerability.

Thomas

“Come on in.”

Thomas followed Alex into his apartment, shivers of anticipation already running down his spine. They were finally going to talk about what they were doing, and it was terrifying.

When he quizzed himself on why he was so worried, Thomas didn't like the answer he got. He was worried that Alex might not want the same things he did. Or, worse yet, that Alex *thought* he wanted those same things before he flaked out again.

But so far, they weren't letting go of each other so easily.

“Want a drink?”

“Water would be great, thanks,” Thomas answered, crashing on the couch. He looked around Alex's little living room as he waited. It was plain, with a navy couch and a purple armchair providing a little color to the whitewashed walls. The huge bed in the corner had bright yellow and soft green blankets, like a little forest. That made him smile; nature themes hadn't been Alex's style before, but it looked cozy.

Still, everything else was white or bare. There weren't even any photos up... no art or personal memories. Thomas frowned as he accepted the glass of water, and Alex sank into the couch next to him. “You're not putting down roots here.”

“It's freaky when you do that,” Alex snorted.

“Do what?”

“The uncomfortable truths. Please stop. I don't like evaluating myself and you're already making me do it in other ways.” Alex winked.

Thomas laughed, nudging their knees together as he turned sideways to better face Alex. “Sorry.”

“Yeah, like I said, I'm getting a house here in town. I didn't want to put in too much effort here before I move,” Alex told him. He was jiggling his leg slightly, as if nervous. That was damn rare; his nerves

were usually steady and hidden behind some professional expression.

He was nervous about talking to Thomas? Curious.

“So you're putting down roots *now*?” Thomas half-smiled. “You're not running away to the big city again?”

Alex scratched his throat and rubbed a thumb along his chin. He watched Thomas closely before picking up his own glass of water. “Like I said, my priorities are changing. I know I sort of... dumped you and ran, and that was a cowardly thing to do. But I'm not looking for the same things as I was back then.”

“Hot sex and a guy who'd hold your hand in public?”

Alex hesitated before chuckling. He looked sheepish. “Actually, yeah, both of those things. But I want... more than that, too. What are *you* looking for? What have you decided on while I've been away?”

Thomas sipped from his water glass to stall answering. He had a pretty firm idea, as with everything in life, but he wasn't sure if it would send Alex running.

“A relationship. Something steady and long-term. I want to date a guy who's in this city for good, or at least for the next ten years. I don't want to be uprooting my life here to chase after someone just blowing through town.”

Alex nodded slowly.

“And someone I like and trust, not just someone I have chemistry with.”

“Do I meet those requirements?” Alex asked. His fingertips were white around the nails, like he was gripping his water glass hard.

*Oh, fuck. He's... interested in my answer. And maybe me?*

“You're serious?” Thomas asked, frowning. “This isn't just to try to... I don't know, make up for whatever we didn't do back then?”

Alex shook his head. “No. Since you moved here, I've been trying to decide if this is a good idea and damn it, I still don't know.”

Thomas knew *that* feeling. He laughed and nodded. “Wait, you know when I moved.”

“I... saw you around,” Alex admitted, and this time, he blushed.

Thomas's eyebrows shot up. “You weren't surveilling me?”

“No!” Alex was quick to insist. “No, I honestly bumped into you at the barbecue. I was talking to Chase.”

Oh. For some reason, Thomas had pictured Alex sitting in a van outside watching his every motion. That was a lot more mundane. Still... “Creeper,” Thomas teased.

“Yeah,” Alex chuckled and set aside his water glass. “Guess I never really got over you, eh?”

Thomas's heart squeezed, the air nearly sucked out of his lungs. Alex might well be joking, but this was the moment for him to be serious. “I never got over you, either.”

Alex had stopped smiling, his eyes wide and gorgeous as they flickered between Thomas's. He parted his lips, drew breath, and paused. Then, he asked, “Really?”

“Yeah,” Thomas nodded firmly. “I thought it was just because we never slept together before – but in bed the other night...” he trailed off. He wasn't sure how to explain that connection.

“I felt it, too,” Alex said, his voice quiet. For once, there wasn't a hint of teasing.

“What have you been up to, really? Why are you suddenly so *for* relationships? Especially if you're all... biased against relationships from surveilling people and stuff?” Thomas asked. Alex was a bit of an enigma, and he had to figure him out.

“Ah.” Alex half-smiled. “I slept around a lot for fun. And work, too.”

Thomas nodded slowly. He could see that. Alex had always been an easy flirt, quick to reciprocate attention and perhaps a little too needy for it. And he was drop-dead gorgeous. All he had to do was turn on that charming smile.

It made Thomas want to irrationally dislike Alex more – perhaps out of jealousy – but he resisted the urge.

“I slept with a few people, I dated a few people,” Thomas shook his head. “But nobody who... stuck on me like you.”

“Yeah,” Alex breathed out. “I know what you mean.” He looked so relieved now that it made Thomas smile.

Alex's hand pressed against the back of his own. Thomas turned his hand over to let Alex trail his fingers against his palm. The touch sent electric crackles of desire through Thomas's whole body.

Thomas laced his fingers with Alex's. He wanted to be more like Alex – a little more brash and brave, spontaneously daring...

He wasn't even sure if he was the first to lean in. They were suddenly kissing in a rush of breath and sliding lips, their hands rising to cup each other's cheeks.

The kiss was warm and sensual and familiar. He knew Alex's lips almost as well as his own. He knew that Alex loved having his lower lip sucked, and that sucking on his collarbone was the way to his dick. Alex got hard in just seconds of necking – inconvenient sometimes, but hot others.

Christ, perhaps more than moving back to this town, kissing Alex felt like coming home.

If it was a bad idea to sleep with your ex, why did this feel so damn *right*?

Alex

Thomas was kissing him hard. Alex felt the desperation radiating through his body in waves of desire.

Holy shit, Thomas wanted him *bad*. Thomas was shifting to straddle him now, and Alex leaned back to let Thomas rest his weight on his lap. Not that there was much of it – he was a cute, scrawny thing, nothing like his brothers or Alex himself.

Alex kind of liked being able to lift him around, though. Thomas fit just right in his arms and under his chin these days. Besides, if he took up skiing, he'd get an even better ass. Though Thomas's was hard to improve upon.

“Mmm,” Thomas groaned, snapping Alex back into the moment. Alex squeezed and rubbed that sexy little ass, then slapped it gently. Thomas tilted his head back to moan and catch his breath.

Alex leaned in to lick from the hollow at the base of his throat all the way up the vulnerable throat under his chin. Then, he kissed back to Thomas's mouth.

Thomas tilted his head, kissing him in return again. His tongue plunged between Alex's lips, caressing the tip of Alex's tongue. He was barely breathing, his chest grinding against Alex's as his thighs slotted around Alex's hip.

Perhaps best of all, Thomas was grinding slowly against his thigh, his hard cock more and more obvious.

Alex was already *burning* to plunge inside that hot, tight body. He wanted to make Thomas moan and squirm and cry out with pleasure just like he had the other night. He wanted Thomas to come so hard he could barely manage Alex's name.

“Oh, fuck, yes,” Thomas moaned, turning his head away again and kissing down Alex's neck. Alex let those soft lips kiss their way up to his earlobe, then shuddered.

He remembered *everything* about him. Including that little spot by his ear that made him quiver and pulse with pleasure... And the



collarbone.

He pulled down the neck of his t-shirt with one finger to properly kiss and lick along the thin skin over the collarbone. Then, he nipped his shoulder and kissed along his chest through the t-shirt.

When Thomas reached under his t-shirt, Alex gladly stripped it off and tossed it aside. He worked at Thomas's t-shirt when Thomas reached up to let him. Once he was shirtless, Alex ran his hand down that bare chest to Thomas's stomach and over to his bulge.

Thomas bucked into his touch as Alex rubbed him through his jeans with the palm of his heel.

"I want you," Alex whispered, licking the side of Thomas's neck. He sucked for a moment, until Thomas quivered and his thighs clenched, then kissed over that spot. "I *really* want you."

"Me, too," Thomas moaned. His voice was a pitch higher, his body half-melting against Alex as he looped his arms around his neck. He tried to sidle back as if to go off the couch on his knees.

Alex grabbed his shoulders. "Come to the bed first."

"Okay." They kissed as they stood up and they kissed as they walked over to the bed. Their hands never left each other for a moment, even when they fell onto the king-sized mattress. That was about the only thing in the apartment Alex cared about.

Oddly enough, he hadn't shared it with anyone since getting back. Even though he'd slept with a couple guys here – never satisfied with them, always yearning for more – he'd never invited a man back here.

That said it all.

He swallowed hard and rolled them over to kiss Thomas's chest.

"I was gonna suck you off," Thomas moaned. "But you're welcome to... get me started."

"I know. I saw you looking down there," Alex teased. He cupped Thomas's cheek until Thomas looked at him. Then, Alex kissed his lips a few times in little pecks until Thomas smiled. "I want to do it first. I... owe you a lot of apologies."

"Blowjobs as apologies?" Thomas laughed, but his eyes were sparkling. He looked playful again, not that painful mix of wary and half-hopeful emotions. Even those had been rare glimpses behind Thomas's brutally polite mask.

Alex murmured, "They never tasted so good..."

Thomas's thighs clenched and unclenched. His chest rose and fell rapidly for a few seconds as the words sank in.

"I've been *dying* for a taste of you," Alex whispered, pressing his lips firmly to the center of Thomas's chest. He kissed along to one of Thomas's nipples and sucked it gently, then dragged his tongue in a slow circle.

"Y-Yes..." Thomas moaned, his fingertips digging into Alex's shoulder. Thomas tried to wrap one leg around Alex's. "Please...!"

Alex chuckled deeply. "In time," he teased in a breathy whisper along the damp flesh.

Thomas's lips were open as he rolled his head back in a soundless reaction to that. Soundless? That wouldn't do.

Alex licked the other nipple, glowing with pride that Thomas already looked about ready to come on the spot. He had to wonder if Thomas burned with the same desire to touch and be touched every time they saw each other.

Alex kissed down to Thomas's stomach and around it, then near the waistband.

"Christ," Thomas whispered. "You're patient now."

Alex grinned. He liked taking his time to make his partner feel good, and when it was Thomas... Well, Thomas deserved the fucking *world*. He could at least give him a great blowjob.

"So worth it," he whispered. "Especially when you come and your face gets all scrunchy. You look like you've seen God. It's the hottest *and* cutest fuckin' thing..."

Thomas stared at him, his cheeks flushed with a mix of embarrassment and arousal. "I... Okay." For once, he was speechless.

Alex laughed and unzipped Thomas's jeans, then slowly wiggled them down his hips and off his legs before tossing them aside. Socks came off easily, too.

That left him in his underwear – sexy, tight boxer briefs that were bulging *hard* in the front.

Alex grinned and scooted back up the bed between Thomas's legs, kissing his way along one almost hairless inner thigh. Thomas's body was so damn hot, and Alex had a feeling Thomas didn't even know it.

“Ah...” Thomas choked back a quiet sound when Alex reached his inner thigh without kissing his aching cock or balls. Just to make it even harder, Alex switched to the other thigh and pressed a slow series of kisses there...

“I'm gonna fuckin' kick you if you don't get to work,” Thomas mumbled. Alex couldn't tell if it was a warning or a threat, but it made him laugh. He didn't remember the last time he'd laughed in bed and it had felt joyful and smooth, not awkward.

“Noted,” Alex teased. He loved watching Thomas both helpless and on top of the world. There was something so damn visceral about sucking a man off, but it was ten times more intense with Thomas. He kissed over the bulge. It lay up and to the side now and lifted the underwear away from his body a little with how hard he was.

“W-We should've showered,” Thomas muttered but Alex snorted. He didn't care about the extra bit of saltiness from his sweat on the trails; it was actually kind of fucking hot.

“Shut up and let me please you.”

“Yes, *sir*,” Thomas murmured sarcastically. He was gazing down his body and watching Alex like he'd never seen anything so hot.

Alex grinned. He hooked his thumbs in the waistband to drag his underwear down, admiring the pink, flushed length that popped free. “Oh, tasty.” Thomas choked back a sound, but not in time. He *liked* Alex's dirty mouth. “I wanna see if it tastes as good as I remember,” Alex whispered, kissing along the base. “It's so damn hot and hard already.”

“Y-You've been fuckin' teasing me for five minutes now,” Thomas almost snapped. His hips arched sharply off the bed at the first warm, wet contact. “Christ, if it weren't I'd be worried.”

Alex smirked and licked from the base all the way up to the tip, watching Thomas's body go through a multitude of tiny shivers and shudders in response. Every muscle was clearly lighting up and quivering involuntarily as his whole body tautened with arousal.

Alex wanted to remember everything that pleased Thomas and show him that being with him could be great. He was memorizing every goddamn second of this encounter. He wanted to remember it for the next month in the shower at least.

And maybe longer. Maybe... much longer.

Alex hastily pushed back those thoughts. One thing at a time, and one

thing demanded his attention. He closed his lips around the smooth tip, sucking his way down to the base of Thomas's cock in a smooth, steady motion. When he reached it, he pulled his head back up and sucked it down again.

It only took him a minute to get into a great rhythm – suck, lick, bob; suck, lick, bob...

Thomas's breathing was loud and harsh. The moans and whimpers that fell from his lips were music to Alex's ears.

“Yes...” Thomas whispered, then pushed on Alex's shoulder. “No, wait. You better stop.”

Alex slowly pulled his head up off Thomas and grinned. “You want something else?”

Thomas nodded before he even finished the sentence. “Do I ever.” He pulled Alex up, yanking him by his biceps in a surprisingly strong grip. When Alex was settled over his chest, Thomas kissed his lips, then swatted his hip. “You feel like you're about ready. Come on, you get naked too. No fair.”

Alex was about ready to burst out of his jeans. The tight fabric was so damn painful, and he welcomed the chance to kick them off. He squirmed to get everything off, almost getting caught by his ankles before he was left naked.

“You want me to finger myself, or do you wanna do it?” Thomas grinned. “Either way, we're lubing up.”

“Of course,” Alex teased. “I'm doing it. Wouldn't miss the chance to tease you even more for the world...”

Now, Thomas groaned. “Oh, of course.”

As Alex pressed his slick fingers to the opening, Thomas pushed into them and Alex leaned in to kiss him again. He loved sliding his fingers in to give Thomas a tease of what to expect next. Better yet, his fingers were flexible enough to get at all the *really* sensitive spots inside him.

He crooked his fingers until he felt the nut-like lump inside, then gently stroked his fingers across it. As his eyes flickered up to Thomas's face, Thomas's mouth fell open for another gasp.

“Oh, *fuck*, that's good.”

Alex grinned. “Isn't it?” He rubbed a little harder, stroking his fingers along it. It was a treat to watch Thomas's body shiver and tense again,

his stomach going taut as his cock twitched.

After another minute of breathy panting and wordlessly thrusting into Alex's fingers, Thomas's face cleared up. He braced his feet on the bed and swatted Alex's thigh. "You are *not* making me come already," Thomas informed him.

"Oh. All right," Alex nodded, his lower lip jutting out thoughtfully. "That's how it is."

"That's how it is."

It only took him a minute or two to finish getting ready, but Thomas already moaned to get him to hurry up. By the time he was pressing against and into Thomas, Alex was nearly losing control himself with his desire – no, *need* – for Thomas.

This time, he was going to do it right.

Alex slid in slowly, taking his time despite Thomas pushing into him forcefully. The enveloping, tight ring around his shaft never failed to feel good. It squeezed him to the brink of ecstasy all the way from top to bottom.

"Yes...!" Thomas moaned throatily. "Oh, yes..."

Alex grunted in agreement and leaned down, bracing himself on his forearm. The moment he could, he kissed Thomas hard. Their bodies thrust as if they were meant to be locked together in rough, raw pleasure. The chemistry was... well, incomparable.

Thomas kept mumbling and moaning encouragement through their kisses. His breathless words and begging were the hottest thing Alex could imagine. Even Alex groaned and grunted more than he usually would, his mind spinning with pleasure.

"You're so sensitive," Alex whispered, brushing his fingers along Thomas's nipple.

Thomas arced like he'd been zapped with electricity. He clenched around Alex's cock hard, interrupting his rhythm for a moment. "Alex!"

Alex drove in harder and faster. He whispered, "You're the hottest man I've ever known. You feel *perfect*."

"You're so fuckin' big, but I suppose you do, too," Thomas mumbled, smiling half-giddily as he said it.

Alex's eyes widened in shock before he kissed Thomas hard in

punishment. "Asshole."

"Fuck me harder then."

"Til you can't think up smart remarks?" Alex went deeper, guessing that was what Thomas wanted. Thomas's breathless sounds of approval confirmed it. Alex's whole body tingled, his fingers digging into the bed as his thighs clenched and his stomach drew tight. "Th-That'll never happen."

"You love it," Thomas smirked. Seeing that touch of an ego from the calm man was delightful.

Alex grinned. "I do." He reached down to run his palm along Thomas's cock. When Thomas grabbed his back, scratching up along his spine, he figured he was on the right track. He wanted Thomas to remember this forever, and he refused to think about why he might be so desperate for his approval.

"Yes...! Oh, I'm almost – Alex, I'm – Alex! Yes, please, Alex... just like that...!"

Alex could never forget how Thomas liked to be jerked off. A hard grip, his fingers acting as perfect ridges around the head of his cock, his thumb swiping around it now and then, an extra twist right at the end of each stroke...

Thomas clenched in pleasure, his muscles shaking as his eyes went hazy and lips parted soundlessly. Then he threw his head back and wetness was coursing out of his stiff, slick cock in quick, hard spurts of need. His body arched off the bed and his feet scrabbled against the blankets for a moment.

Alex was yanked down against Thomas's chest by how hard he grabbed and dug in his nails. Alex quickly ran his spare hand up Thomas's arm to pull it up and over his head. He pinned his hand on the bed above him, giving him something to grab.

Thomas squeezed *hard*. His face showed the most beautiful story of pleasure, written plain as day.

The extra tight squeezes, the sexy fucking sight of Thomas coming completely undone around and under him... it all added up. Alex felt his own orgasm hit a little too late to stop it and he gasped. He might have whispered Thomas's name or just thought it, he wasn't entirely sure.

Either way, he was driving hard into Thomas with each warm burst of pleasure that crashed through him. It was a fire deep in his belly and

an electric crackle across every inch of his skin. It was a flush to his face and lips and the impossible need to be in Thomas forever.

Alex moaned wordlessly as Thomas let go of his back and cupped his cheek instead, hauling him in to kiss him.

Thomas didn't stop kissing him, either, as the last few drops trickled out. Alex had to pull out carefully before he softened. The only time Thomas let go was to let him throw out the condom. Then, Thomas was pulling him against him again and kissing.

Alex kissed back hard, trying to say it all with his body. Alex loved the way Thomas held him in this moment, like a precious thing. The deepest intimacy between them was in their eyes as Alex blinked to clear his head, then met Thomas, watching him like...

Well, like he loved him.

Alex's cheeks flushed with embarrassment. For a moment, he didn't know what to say. The idea was laughable: he'd quipped his way out of other men's beds all the time, but now Thomas watched him like he saw every thought behind his eyes...

It was almost disconcerting.

"Wow," Thomas whispered at last, and Alex laughed at how that word really didn't cover it at all. Thomas quirked a brow. "What?"

"Just..." Alex trailed off, shaking his head wordlessly. He rolled onto his side, sliding his leg between Thomas's and running his hand down his side. He didn't care that his hand and Thomas's stomach were sticky as hell, or that he was gonna have to do laundry now. "It's strange." He hoped that word didn't sound wrong.

"It is," Thomas murmured. He understood what Alex meant: the strangeness of coming together again after all these years, almost as different people, but with the deep knowledge of each other before their adult defenses formed... after breaking each other's hearts in subtly different ways.

Christ. He had to stop psychoanalyzing himself. Thomas was rubbing off on him.

"Did you wanna stay the night?" Alex murmured, his heart fluttering with the impulsive offer. He had the feeling that might be moving too fast, but he had to put it out there.

Thomas's eyes flickered and he pushed himself up onto his elbow, then shook his head slowly. "I can't."

*Can't or won't?* Alex nodded anyway. “Fair enough.” He lay back and let Thomas slowly gather his wits and get dressed.

Thomas moved jerkily, as if anxious about something. His eyes kept roving back to Alex. He smiled every time, but there was something else going on behind those deep eyes. Maybe he'd say what it was someday; maybe not.

“I'll walk you to my apartment door, at least,” Alex murmured. He pushed himself up, surprised to find Thomas taking him by the hand for their short walk down the hall.

When they reached the front door, Thomas turned to him and leaned in to press a quick kiss to his lips. “I'll see you soon.”

That sounded like a promise – and a genuine one. Alex knew he'd lit up, but he couldn't play cool now. “Great. See you soon.” He pecked Thomas's lips in return, then ran a hand over his shoulder affectionately before dropping it.

Thomas smiled back at him and let himself out as Alex watched. When the door was closed, Alex shook his head.

That was it, then. Whether Thomas was panicking about falling for his ex again or having to come out, Alex would have to deal with it and help him through it. There was no other choice, because Alex was stuck on this man.



Thomas

“You wanted to talk to me?”

Thomas's palms were sweating, so he pressed them against his trousers before folding his hands behind his back. “If possible, yes,” he addressed his boss with a polite nod.

Irma Davidson was a legend in the bank: she'd been working as a teller since she was fourteen, and all she'd say was that she was “considerably older” now. She looked past retirement age, but she clearly loved her work. She was the favorite of all the customers who knew her from years ago, and she was polite but firm with all the new hires.

Thomas had gotten on instantly with her, probably because she respected his work ethic. He didn't fiddle around on Facebook as much as the other young tellers, and he tried to see opportunities to jump in and help.

“Come on in.” Irma invited Thomas into her office, holding open the door for him before crossing the room to sit behind her desk.

Thomas closed the door, then sat opposite her and folded his hands. “I... wasn't sure about saying this, but I've been thinking about it, and...”

“All right, young man,” Irma nodded, and Thomas's shoulders sank a little with relief. She wasn't rushing him. “What's going on?”

“I think I saw... inappropriate... conduct,” was the best way Thomas could put it. “And it's by someone more senior, so I felt like it's tattling.”

“No, I'm glad you reported this. When was this?”

“Last Thursday afternoon.”

“What did you see?”

Thomas recited what he'd so carefully practiced: “I was walking by the offices to guide a customer back to his seat when I spotted, er... a blind ajar in Anna's office. I looked through. Not, you know, spying.

Just accidentally. And Anna was... er, engaged with one of her clients.”

“One of our mortgage clients?”

Thomas nodded. He'd watched the man walk out twenty minutes later looking cool as a cucumber, and he'd definitely spotted that wedding ring again. After a quick word with Maggie, he'd found out the rest of the story. He was Darren, he was supposedly sweet and charming, and Anna was helping him buy his first house with his wife, an adorable young IT pro.

“Do you know if this was one of her clients specifically?”

“Yes, it was. His name's Darren, but I don't know anything else except that he and his wife are her clients for their first mortgage. The ethics code...”

“I know what the ethics code says,” Irma informed him tartly and he blushed. Her voice softened as she added, “Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I'll bring this to the proper channels. Anything else?”

“N-No, that's it.” That was it? No interrogation? He'd been dreading having to repeat his story to all the managers, or being dragged into a room with Anna to tell her what he'd said, or... all the ridiculous situations his mind invented. “I felt bad about saying anything – it looks bad, and she's so good at what she does, but...”

“You did the right thing, kid,” Irma told him in a voice that left no room for doubt. Sure, he doubted it internally, but he couldn't express it against that iron will. He just smiled sheepishly and stood up. “Thanks, Ms. Davidson.”

“I wish you'd call me Irma,” she answered, rising to her feet, but her eyes twinkled. She seemed to enjoy the formality; Thomas's peers called her by her first name easily, and he wanted to impress them. The bank was often a lot more formal than it appeared. Despite trying to look casual and hip to customers, there were a lot of people behind the scenes that were more impressed by cravats than the cool factor.

“I'll try to remember that,” Thomas grinned back. He headed out of the office and back over to his desk, rearranging his pens and trying to focus on his everyday work again. It was early in the morning, and one never knew how busy the day would be. Monday usually was, though, as people came on their lunch breaks to finish the banking they'd wanted to do over the weekend when the banks were closed.

He'd be a terrible private investigator. He wasn't sure if knowing the secret or telling it had been worse, but what was done was done. That was the end of it.

---

It turned out that Thomas had only *hoped* that was the end of it. By mid-afternoon, it became clear that wasn't true.

A middle-aged man whom Thomas vaguely recognized from management – the central office, not the bank branch – asked to speak to him alone. Barry, he was pretty sure the guy's name was. *Gregson? Barry Gregson? Yes...*

The exchange drew the curious gazes of his coworkers. He shrugged to them and finished depositing checks and withdrawing cash for one of his clients. The clients came first, after all.

Minutes later, Thomas approached Mr. Gregson and was pulled into a meeting room.

“Good to see you again, Thom,” Barry greeted with a friendly clap on the arm. It was a little old-boys-club and Thomas really didn't like the nickname, but he forced a smile and nodded. Where Irma came off as sincere and reassuring, there was something about this man he didn't like.

“Thanks, sir. You too.”

“I've heard great things about you from Irma. In fact, I wanted to talk to you about your experience and education...”

Thomas hadn't expected that. He almost recoiled, then blinked and nodded. “Of course, sir. What did you want to know?”

“I understand your eventual career objective is to become a loan officer. If there were a position available today, with mentoring and training to help you transition roles, would you be interested?”

The direct question had Thomas flabbergasted. “I, uh... Um, yes, sir. I do want that. I just wasn't expecting to hear that.”

“You've been turning heads for a while. I heard you went to school in Halifax alongside your job to get extra skills, and I want to take advantage of that extra knowledge. It's wasted on the front end. We're looking to fill a position here as we transfer a loan officer to Halifax. You have a finance degree, right?”

Oh. This was the return of the boomerang he'd thrown out earlier today. He'd expected to be shunted away from well-paying promotions, not offered them on a platter. Certainly not offered the job of the person he'd tattled on earlier that morning. "I... I do, yes."

"And that's exactly what we're looking for.

"Ah, I see." Thomas fought his impulse to give an enthusiastic yes. "Um, what sort of timeline are you thinking for... giving me a chance to think about it?"

"I understand. It's a major promotion. Take a few days if you want, but we'd want to hear as soon as possible so we can fill that vacancy. I think you'd be well-suited to the job, and Irma agrees."

Alex swallowed. "Okay. Thanks, sir. I'd like to take some time to think about it, but I appreciate the offer." He'd always expected it to come from Irma, if it were coming from anyone.

"Of course. Let me know soon."

Barry came off less sincere the more Thomas talked to him, but Thomas shook hands anyway. He left the meeting room then, his mind spinning.

They were just transferring Anna to Halifax? Wasn't a breach of the ethics code serious enough to warrant firing? This guy was upper management, and Irma had never seemed particularly happy to have him around. Was this promotion offer even coming from her?

What the hell was he going to do?

---

The muffled clanging was a dull, comforting throbbing heartbeat in their backyards. Though the forge was muffled and the building insulated, the dull thudding was unmistakable.

Thomas loved it. He liked going out to help Jackson sometimes, collecting scraps or holding pieces down for him. He certainly wasn't built to be a blacksmith like his big brother, but it was a nice way to spend some time together. Sometimes they even had their manly bonding moments over a beer in the forge, or they could talk about whatever bothered them.

He'd talked Jackson through a bit of his feelings about dating Chase in that exact way. It only seemed right to approach Jackson with the dilemma of his own.

About the promotion first, not about dating Alex. He couldn't tell him about Alex...

Thomas knocked on the forge door and let himself in. "Hey, you busy?"

"Busy as I get," Jackson shrugged. "Always got time for you," he tossed a smile over at Thomas. "Come in."

Thomas grinned back and closed the door behind him, stomping the snow from his boots. Jackson really needed a walkway that ran from the house out to the yard. They had a back deck that stretched the span of all three properties so they never had to set foot on the ground as long as they shoveled it off, but not out here. Next summer, maybe.

"What's up?" Jackson followed up when Thomas didn't say anything. He unscrewed the clamped item – some kind of twisted rod – and gripped it in the tongs to dip back in the fire.

Thomas took a seat at the worktable nearby. "Not much. Just thinking about work."

"Yeah? More drama about missed lunch breaks?" Jackson teased. When Thomas took a moment to smile back, his eyes sharpened and he pulled the rod out, then clamped and twisted it. His eyes were more on the work than Thomas, but his attention was on his brother now. "Or deeper shit?"

"Deeper," Thomas admitted. "Would you take a promotion if it felt like a bribe?"

Jackson paused mid-twist, his brows furrowing as he looked up at Thomas. He considered the question, then shrugged. "It depends what the bribe's for."

"Tattling, I guess."

Jackson raised his eyebrow. "We're not in middle school. If you told someone about something serious, that's different from getting made a supervisor because you told them who breaks all the pencil tips."

Thomas managed a chuckle. "Um, it was a breach of the ethics code, more or less... I caught-- no, didn't catch, per se. Just happened to glimpse... one of the loan officers fucking their client. Their married client." Really, he was just as pissed at that Darren guy for being such a loser. *Bet nothing happens to him.*

Jackson raised his eyebrows. "You're talking... secret office illicit rendezvous? Jesus, have you walked onto a daytime soap?"

"Feels like it," Thomas laughed. "I told Irma, my boss – the cool one. Then this guy from upper management came to talk to me later and offered me a promotion to loan officer because they're moving her to Halifax. I really, really want and need the promotion, but..."

Jackson nearly dropped his tongs. "Wait, they're *transferring* her? Not firing her, or... disciplining her? Transferring to Halifax is a goddamn reward."

"I guess so. I don't know what happened behind the scenes. All I know is there was, um... internal stuff going on."

Jackson's eyes narrowed. "If that's the case, you probably weren't the only person to tell on them. Other people had to know."

That hadn't even occurred to Thomas. "...Oh."

"Upper management happening to be hanging around little old Fredericton? There was probably an internal investigation ongoing. They hire asshole private detectives like *that* guy to snoop around. You're probably just next in line for the promotion anyway."

Thomas opened his mouth for a moment, then closed it. *Ah, yes. I don't think he even knows I know Alex.* He cleared his throat. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Mr. Logical Dude hadn't thought that he wasn't the only fellow snooping?" Jackson grinned. "Office gossip is hot. I hear that's what people do all day. That and Facebook."

"Yeah. That's about right, actually." Thomas almost felt bad, but he knew Jackson made a hell of a lot more than he did for his extra physical labor. Well, at least a promotion would close that gap...

"I mean, cheaters are assholes and deserve to be dumped. If sleeping with your clients is prohibited – and I'd guess it would be for financial services like that – then yeah, you were right to tell," Jackson told him. "And don't feel bad if you decide to take the promotion. Needs must."

*Only if I decide to date an asshole private detective?* Thomas's cheeks were hot. "Yeah."

"Was that it?" Jackson looked perceptive as he watched Thomas. He turned his gaze back to his work, twisted once more, then laid the item on the forge to hammer it a few times this way and that.

"Um..."

Jackson glanced up. "Hey, you kept my secrets, I'll keep yours."

Thomas hadn't told Cam when Jackson had chosen him over Cam to talk to about his new love interest. It was only fair that Jackson return that favor.

Thomas's cheeks were even hotter as he touched his face. "Yeah, uh. Just been weird, dating-wise. There's someone I've kind of... liked for a while now."

"Oho," Jackson grinned. "I knew that wasn't all." He set down his hammer and rolled his shoulders, leaning back against the table. "Spill."

"I'm still deciding if it's even a good idea."

"Why wouldn't it be?"

Really and truly, when Thomas searched his heart for the answer, he wasn't sure he had one that would stand up to scrutiny.

Alex had apologized for snooping on his family. Sure, he was a dick sometimes, but he was getting a lot better and Thomas could more than handle his smarmy moods. He seemed like he was here to stay this time. Hell, he rescued fuckin' stray animals.

More than that, Thomas hadn't stopped thinking about him since skiing on Saturday. When he'd gone to sleep Saturday night, he'd thought about sleeping in Alex's arms.

He was utterly hooked again.

"Just stupid reasons, I guess," Thomas admitted. "I don't know, you all seemed so certain when you chose people to date."

"Nah, it's not really easy from start to finish. It's a lot of scary figuring shit out," Jackson told him. "Whether you'll work together, whether you're both willing to work to stay together... There's so much to think about. The early stages are the worst."

"Yeah? Then why did you stick with it?"

Jackson's expression grew tender. He was a lot softer-hearted than most people realized, and he was shitty at hiding it behind a strong, silent mask. Seeing it happen – the switch in his entire mood when he thought about Chase – always made Thomas smile. "I just looked at him one day, once I realized he liked me as much as I liked him. And I... knew," Jackson admitted with a quiet laugh. "You know, can't stop thinking about him, want to protect him and be around him all the time, just... *want* to make it work, no matter what life throws at us. Or what barriers we each put up at first. You know, you want to push

through all that.”

Thomas felt like there was a lump in his throat. He hadn't expected *that* detailed an answer.

“Do you think this person would be the type to stick around and make it work? You need someone as stable as you are,” Jackson told him.

Thomas half-smiled. It was odd, but he instantly knew the answer: yes. Alex was ready for more, and he was waiting for Thomas to say yes. Every sign pointed to it. Alex kept hinting that he would be okay if Thomas *didn't* want to get involved, and that he was interested in having a boyfriend, and that he liked spending time around Thomas again.

Until now, he'd instinctively thought it was the other way around. He'd just assumed he would always be pursuing, not pursued. What if it was *him* throwing up those barriers Jackson had just mentioned? Shit, what if he'd been doing that for years?

“Oh,” Thomas murmured quietly. “Yeah, I... I think so.”

“Then tell them and see what they say. They might just be waiting for you. You're an awesome guy,” Jackson told him. “Let someone see that.”

Thomas swiped an arm across his eyes and nodded. *If only you knew who it was. Oh, that's gonna be an interesting meeting. I'll put it off as long as I can.* “Thanks, man,” Thomas nodded.

Jackson gave him a moment's genuine smile and reached out to punch his shoulder lightly, then yanked him in for a one-armed hug. “Now you've got my sweat on you.”

“Gross!” Thomas laughed, shoving Jackson away and punching him harder, right in the chest. “God. Don't know why I offer to help you.”

“I didn't know you were offering to help. Pick up those pieces,” Jackson grinned. “I'll make something for you out of them sometime.”

Little metal art pieces were already appearing in all three of their homes, especially as Jackson's work slowed down over the winter. Thomas wouldn't turn down another. He grumbled and shook his head as he gathered pieces.

Yeah, Jackson was pretty damn good at advice.

He had to call Alex... soon. Maybe tomorrow.



Alex

Lexy was... devastated.

"I know it's not easy hearing this," Alex told her gently. "Or seeing it. I don't want to make you sit through it right now. Nothing – well, the last video, but almost nothing – is *incredibly* graphic, but it will be emotional for you."

"It's okay," Lexy whispered. "I'll believe you. What do they show?"

"All the other videos are what I already told you about." Alex pushed the DVD across the table to her, along with a small stack of written reports from the most important stakeouts. "The last one is from the ski trip I told you I was watching."

"And?"

"He and Anna... did... rendezvous in the cabin."

"Oh, god," Lexy whispered, pressing her fingers to her lips for a moment. "Do you think they're...?"

"What?" Alex frowned, but he spoke gently. She couldn't be pushed right now.

"Romantically involved?"

"It's impossible for an outsider to say, but... repeated meetings?" Alex shook his head. "That's not in the boundary of your relationship according to what you told me."

"I know, I know, but... I love him."

Alex went serious, a chill running down his spine. He reached out, letting her decide if she met him halfway. She did; her hands nestled in his larger ones. "Lexy, I mean this: if he's cheating over and over with different women, it's no different than over and over with the same woman. And this guy's doing *both*. You love *him*, but that'll never be enough. *He* has to decide to love *you*. If you two had decided to be non-monogamous? That would be totally different. But you didn't. You married him thinking you were the only one."

She was crying now, but quietly. It wasn't anything Alex hadn't seen a

hundred times, but every time, it made his heart hurt.

This time, though, it didn't drive another nail into the coffin of relationships. Just *bad* relationships.

"I'll leave you with this until you call me again. This is far more than enough evidence for your divorce case, if you choose to take it that way. And this is completely personal advice, frankly, but... it's rare to find a man acting as badly as he is."

Lexy nodded slowly, pulling her hands back to grab tissues and compose herself. She sat up a little straighter. "Would you be there in court to present this?"

"If you need it, yes. If it goes that far. Most of the time it won't. When you show him the evidence, if you need me there for safety..."

"My friends will be there," she promised. "I'll be okay." She rose to her feet, gathering everything to tuck into her handbag. "I can't thank you enough. I'll pay your bill tonight when you send me the invoice."

"Okay," Alex murmured and rose to his feet. "Seriously, if you need my help with anything about this, call me. I don't want to see him win this one again."

"It's the last time," Lexy promised. Her voice was low, but determined. Alex had gotten through.

---

Despite worrying that he was going to be waiting weeks for his next call, Alex found himself almost annoyed by how many he was getting as soon as he turned on the TV.

He gave himself a reality check a second later. More business was what he wanted and needed. He'd leave the TV running all day if it made more people call.

But of course, when one call came in, he was guaranteed to get three. Just as Alex finished taking down the details of his next case, there was another call.

He hesitated, but he grumpily picked up the phone again.

"I don't know if you remember, but you asked me to give you a call if a MacLeod checked in coming from Ontario."

Alex sat bolt upright, muting the TV. "Yes, I did." Technically it was a violation of privacy laws to disclose the identities of guests in his

motel, but George owed him a few favors. Also, George knew Alex wouldn't have asked him if he hadn't been serious.

“There's a fellow here by the name of Mark MacLeod from Ontario.”

A chill ran down Alex's spine. He walked over to his wardrobe and yanked it open to grab work clothes. Professional enough not to attract attention, but clothes he didn't mind being ruined in a fight. “With a capital L?”

“Yeah. That was unusual enough, and I think you wanted to hear about a Mark...”

“I do. Thanks very much, George. I really appreciate this.”

George answered, “You're welcome. Just don't get me into any trouble.”

“Of course I won't. Thanks,” Alex told him again, hanging up. He yanked off his sweatpants and hoodie, changing into his work clothes. He hesitated, his hand hovering over his private investigator ID. The province required that investigators carry it on the job, but he didn't necessarily want this being part of his work.

He swallowed hard and left it behind, grabbing his jacket and shoes. He almost tripped over himself in his haste to get out the door with his phone, wallet, and keys.

The bastard. How *dare* he?

The drive down to George's motel down on the river was quick. Alex took it about five over the speed limit – just slow enough that no cops would bother pulling him over. He really wanted to floor it, though.

He just hoped Mark was waiting before he went out for food, maybe resting up from the drive.

It didn't take Alex long to work out which motel room Mark was staying in. He parked around the side of the building in the guest spots, then found the car with the Ontario plates and obnoxious cross stickers. He strode to the door and knocked hard.

When the door opened, he almost recoiled from how familiar this man looked.

He was almost the picture of Jerry, Chase's ugly-ass uncle who had come to try to kick the gay out of him in August. Alex would never stop feeling bad that it had been *him* that outed Chase's new identity and town after Chase had come here to flee his shitty family.

The least he could do was keep this new town safe for Chase.

“What are you doing here?” he snapped, pushing open the door further before Mark stopped him. “I think we need to talk.”

“Jerry told me there might be a... *man* or two... in Charlie's life, keeping him isolated.”

“Keeping him protected from assholes like you. You can get the fuck out of town. He doesn't want to talk to you,” Alex told him flatly. Chase had driven Jerry out of town and told Alex to keep him out. He assumed that applied to other family members.

Even Chase's father.

---

“You have no right to tell me that he doesn't want to see me.”

They'd gone in circles for a few minutes: Alex insisting flatly that Chase wanted him to stay away and threatening him as much as he could without technically breaking any laws; Mark insisting that he deserved to talk to his son because he was sad and missing his soul's salvation or some shit like that.

“Fine,” Alex snapped. He was getting awfully sick of Chase's dad. “I'll go ask him, but I already know what his answer will be. When I come tell you it, will you fuck off?”

“That language isn't necessary. I want to speak with him.”

“Yeah. Of course.” Alex jerked his chin toward Mark. “You stay here. I'll be back soon.”

He *hated* feeling like he was boxed in by his job. If he got a single assault charge, he'd lose his license. Anything that showed he was unstable or trying to bully his way around the job. The TV impression of P.I.s was a hell of a lot more sexy than the reality.

Alex breathed heavily as he climbed into the car, taking a moment to ground himself and calm down. He imagined the anger sinking out of him and through the bottom of the car into the ground. Then, he rolled his shoulders and started up the car. He knew a few quick tricks for getting himself mentally focused enough to safely drive after a tension-filled interaction. There were also other tricks, like how to escape aggressive dogs, but it had been a while since he'd had to do that.

The drive to the neighborhood where the three brothers lived was quick since Fredericton was pretty small. It was fast enough that Alex hadn't even fully formed what he wanted to say to the brothers. He just hoped he could see Chase without any of the others catching sight of him. They didn't have time to sort out the snarls of their relationships just now.

He did a few extra loops just to make damn sure he wasn't being followed. When he was certain it was safe, he pulled up in front of the trio of houses and parked on the curb.

Of course, the moment he stepped out into the snow bank, his feet sank through the crunchy icy layer on top into softer snow. Good thing he wore sturdy boots this time of year, though he grimaced anyway.

Wait. He smelled... burgers. In the winter air, the scent of a barbecue was pretty unmistakable. He couldn't really see any of the other neighbors being the type to barbecue in the winter. It also struck him as exactly the sort of thing these brothers would do.

Yeah, all of their cars were home, and the backyard lights were on. It was definitely them barbecuing, which probably meant they were all together.

"Oh, fuck," he whispered. But he didn't have a choice: he had to warn Chase and get his father out of town. He straightened up his shoulders, struggling out of the snow bank and onto the sidewalk.

Once he had his dignity again, Alex strode quickly up the walkway to Thomas's house first. If he were there, it would definitely be the best reception. Thomas could sneak off and grab Chase so as to avoid alarming the others.

After he rang the bell, there was no answer.

"That would be too easy."

Which of them was less likely to punch him: Jackson or Cam? No, more importantly, where were they more likely to be? He cast his mind back to the barbecue, then remembered seeing the less-weathered part of the porch where the grill normally sat. That was on Jackson's deck.

He strode up to Jackson's house to knock next, and sure enough, he heard voices a moment later.

Alex straightened up when the door opened, resisting the urge to wince. It was Cam, who would definitely recognize him.

Cam hesitated for a moment, his eyes narrowing in recognition and a quick search of his memory.

Alex nodded. "Hello. We've met before, but I need to talk to Chase now."

He glanced over Cam's shoulder to the quiet living room and... there was Thomas, frozen and gazing at him like a deer in the headlights.

Cam frowned suspiciously. "Chase? Why? You're... You're that guy from the park, aren't you? The hockey court? Who looked for me?"

He *could* use his relationship with Thomas to get inside, but... that would be a dick move. He just smiled and nodded slightly. "I apologize for that. I know you're probably pissed off, but I wouldn't be here if I didn't need to talk to Chase."

Jackson was walking up now, scowling. "This is the guy who looked you up?" he asked Cam. The two of them blocked the doorway while Noah and Thomas stayed in the background. He couldn't see Chase yet. "You're not the same detective who tracked down Chase?"

*Well, this isn't going well.* Alex nodded again. "And I've done all I can to make up for that. That's why I'm here now."

Cam looked at Jackson, deferring to his judgment.

Jackson paused, then nodded once. "Come on in."

The atmosphere was far from friendly as Alex stepped into the second Riley brother's house. He'd never been into Cam's, but hopefully he wouldn't have to see it anytime soon if this was any indication of his reception.

Alex resisted the urge to catch Thomas's eyes. He didn't want Thomas to intervene and out himself, after all. He could handle an ice-cold reception from Cam or a hot-tempered guy like Jackson relatively easily. And Noah was watching him with a fair amount of resentment, but he didn't pose a huge threat either. Thomas just had to stay quiet and nobody would have to know.

His heart squeezed as he wondered how long Thomas would stay silent, or if this would be the finishing straw. Maybe Thomas saw how hard it would be for him to integrate into the family. He could pick pretty much any guy he wanted and they'd be quicker to accept him.

"So... where's Chase?"

Jackson eyed him again, then nodded upstairs. "Just up there. He'll be down in a minute."

Alex folded his hands behind his back and stood straight, offering a polite smile. This wasn't how he'd pictured his first meeting with the family of his lover, but... needs must.

"Is he in danger?" That was Jackson, his annoyance fading into concern for his boyfriend.

Alex drew a breath and let it out, then nodded. "Only a bit. I can deal with it. I just need permission."

Jackson licked his lips, clearly screwing up his pride, then gestured at the couch. "Come on, have a seat."

Though he'd almost prefer to be standing, Alex smiled and accepted the invitation, sinking onto the couch. He tried to prepare for the questions he knew were coming.

All he focused on, though, was Thomas sitting on the other end of the couch.

He finally let his eyes flicker over to Thomas and nodded slightly, then looked over at Jackson and Cam as they sat opposite him. Noah sat on the arm of Cam's chair.

Jackson raised his voice. "Chase!"

Thomas flinched. His nerves were possibly more wound up than either of his brothers', then.

"Someone to see you."

Jackson turned his gaze back to Alex, his expression shifting. He'd let go of the grudge already, focusing instead on the current crisis like Alex wanted him to do.

*Good man. I can work with him.*

Hopefully the rest of them would be the same.

Thomas

When the doorbell rang, Thomas hadn't imagined who it would be. He'd certainly never imagined Alex being invited inside by his protective older brothers. Though... he *had* imagined that if they ever met, it would be about this awkward.

Christ, they were all stiff and tense. It was like bulls in the living room. Noah was about the only one looking less tense than everyone else.

Once Jackson called out to let Chase know he needed to come downstairs, silence settled for a few seconds. Then, Cam spoke up.

"How have you been, then? I think you were in my class."

"I was, yeah," Alex nodded. "Been good. Lived in downtown Toronto for a while, traveled around... I like being back, though."

"Yeah. Coming home is always weird, but it's all right here."

Thomas dared to let out his breath. Cam seemed to be making an effort. Now that Jackson was focused on Chase's well being and not what Alex had done to him before, the atmosphere was settling. The only wild card was Noah, who was usually pretty easy to read but was on his guard now. Knowing him, he was probably still irked but politely hiding it.

Chase came down a minute later, having changed out of his barbecue sauce-stained shirt and washed up after the tremendous accident. Cam had been gesturing too enthusiastically and slammed his hand on a bottle of sauce that was lying on its side but open. It had squirted in Chase's face and over his shirt.

The uproarious laughter from minutes ago was all but forgotten as Chase froze on the stairs. "Oh. It's you."

Alex looked wryly resigned to the less than warm welcome as he rose to his feet. "I don't want to be blunt, but there probably isn't much time. Your father's in town. I need to make sure you don't want him around."

"Of course I don't," Chase scoffed, his eyes narrowing and shoulders



tensing. "Is my uncle there too? Or did Dad come alone?"

"Just your dad."

Thomas swallowed, glancing between them.

"Well, we can go fuckin' sort this out, then," Jackson said. He rose to his feet before Cam grabbed him and pulled him back into his seat.

"No, we should let Alex deal with it. The less they know about us, the better," Cam told him. "And you don't need to be getting in trouble."

Chase was silent, his eyes flickering between them all.

"He should be seen out one way or another," Jackson argued.

Cam nodded. "Yeah, but not with a fight. The cops arrest you and it looks bad on everyone."

"They don't have to arrest me."

Chase took the last few steps down the stairs and approached. "Guys--"

Noah spoke up. "You really think he's the type not to call the cops? He has a vendetta against you now, remember? We can't threaten or intimidate them."

"Religious wackos," Jackson scoffed. "So what?"

"Let Chase decide what he wants to do." Thomas spoke up louder, nodding at Chase. Chase had been looking like he wanted to say something.

"How do we know this is the truth?" Jackson frowned, looking over at Cam and then Alex. "That his dad's really here? Maybe it's some other MacLeod."

"Obviously you don't, but Chase told me to let him know if anyone came back to town. I've been watching ever since. I talked to him in person – I know it's him."

Jackson sucked in his breath. "You went to confront him? Why? Why isn't he gone yet?" His tone was slightly accusatory. Chase came over to stand by him, rubbing his back slightly to bring him back down.

Alex stayed calm, not rising to the bait. "I wanted to deal with it immediately, but he wouldn't leave without hearing directly from Chase that Chase doesn't want to talk to him."

"So, what, Chase goes to talk to him? Hell, no," Jackson scowled.

Cam shook his head. "Not by himself. With one of us? Or all of us..."

Noah laughed under his breath. "Back to the threats," he commented, though they ignored him. Thomas thought he was right, though: calm conversation was better than overreacting. The more they reacted, the more likely the whole family would show up on Chase's doorstep to try to free him from them.

"I'm going with him," Alex told them firmly. "But I don't think any of you should come."

There was a resounding moment of silence. Thomas knew exactly what Alex's logic was, but he winced anyway. *Oh, this is going to go well.*

"I want to be there," Jackson immediately disagreed.

"No." Alex gave him a long, steady look. "There's too much risk you'll lose your temper at him and I can't be involved in violence. This is a calm meeting where we tell him to fuck off or we get a restraining order."

Jackson still narrowed his eyes. He didn't look happy with that answer. "Can we trust you to keep him safe? I don't know you from Dick," Jackson scoffed. "I don't know you're not just acting under his father's orders again. You fucked up Chase's life and Cam's."

Alex opened his mouth to retort, losing his cool for the first time as heat flushed to his cheeks. "Not because I didn't do my job. I'm trying to do it, if you'd let me--"

Thomas rose to his feet. "Stop it," he snapped loudly enough that everyone listened. "Jackson, even you. I know you're worried for Chase, but you can trust Alex."

Jackson was startled out of his annoyance, his shoulders sinking again. "How do you know?"

"Because *I'd* trust him with anything." For a moment, Thomas understood what Cam might have felt that spring. He wasn't fainting, but fuck, it almost felt like it. His fingers tingled as nervous heat flushed through him. His heartbeat raced in his stomach.

"Fuck it, let's go. I'm going with you," Thomas told Alex. Alex knew better than to disagree. He nodded slightly. Thomas strode for the back door, shoved his boots on, and headed out along the back porch to get his jacket from his own house.

The air hit his lungs with the bitter cold of a January evening. He

almost felt like he couldn't breathe now, but steam hung in the air from his heavy breath so he knew he was fine.

He'd probably just come out to them.

Christ, it was about time, though.

Thomas grabbed his jacket from his own house and zipped it up, then took the shortcut back to Jackson's house again.

Chase was in his winter jacket now, his boots on. Alex stood by the door while the other three men stood nearby. This time, they weren't crowding him though.

"All right," Thomas said. "Let's go sort this shit out." He didn't wait to look at Jackson, Cam, and Noah, though he felt all three of them watching him. His cheeks still burning, his hands almost shaking as he pulled open the door and stepped onto the porch, followed by Chase.

"Brr," Chase whispered, shoving his hands into his pockets. "God, it's cold."

Thomas was too busy listening behind him.

"Bring Chase back safe and sound," Jackson said to Alex, his voice low. "If my brother trusts you, that's enough for me... but..."

"I understand," Alex instantly assured him. Thomas glanced back in time to see him grab Jackson's hand and shake it once. "We'll be back soon."

"Okay." Jackson let out a breath, then reached out to pull Chase in for a quick, crushingly tight hug and kiss.

Thomas accompanied Alex down to his car, giving Chase the front seat while he sat in the back. He glanced out the window, watching scenery pass by as he settled back.

*We'll deal with it later. First, we get Chase's situation sorted out.* Thomas had waited long enough... a little longer wouldn't kill him.

Cam

Even after bringing the food in to keep it warm in the oven, Jackson had too much energy to sit still. He was pacing around the kitchen and living room, taking every opportunity to stand up to fetch another beer or tidy something up.

His restlessness made Cam twitch, though Noah was doing his best to rub his shoulder and clap Jackson's arm, keeping them more or less grounded.

None of them said much at first. It probably took the others a couple minutes to process the encounter with Alex.

For his part, Cam's mind raced. Thomas had sounded so familiar with Alex – his defense of him hadn't been reasoned, but impassioned. That much directness was rare for him.

"So, I wonder what Alex is doing around," Cam finally said. There was no point in pretending it wasn't what was on all of their minds.

"Chase *did* ask him to keep an eye out for his family," Noah murmured. "We talked once or twice about... that kind of stuff."

"Oh?" Jackson looked at him, and there was no hiding the hurt expression. "He never mentioned..."

"Probably didn't want you to get... like you get," Cam laughed. When his older brother gave him a rueful look, he smiled. "Not that I'm blaming you. If Noah were in that situation, there'd be no stopping me either."

"I still can't believe it's the same guy who fucked up Chase's life *and* yours."

"He didn't actually do anything--"

Jackson scoffed. "He made you almost have a heart attack."

That was *sort* of true, but it was a bit of a stretch. Cam didn't want to push any buttons while Jackson was understandably worked up, though, so he just shrugged. "I just didn't know it was the same guy."

"I'm more worried about Thomas," Noah murmured, rubbing his chin.

"I didn't know he and Alex..."

"Yeah, what was that about?" Jackson frowned. "He talked to me the other day about some kind of promotion he was offered as a bribe. He said he found this inappropriate work situation, but... what if Alex is involved? God, I hope he wasn't the one investigating on the company's behalf... using Thomas for information or something."

Cam leaned back on the couch and kicked his feet up on the coffee table. "It's possible," he admitted. "I don't think he seems like that kinda guy, but it is. I don't remember much about him from school, just that he was kind of a... I don't know, bad boy. And he wasn't quite *out*, but everyone knew. He didn't talk to you or me much, did he?"

"Yeah," Jackson hummed. "I barely remember him. He would've only been getting into high school when I was leaving anyway."

"What if they dated?" Noah asked, his voice carefully neutral.

Jackson scowled. "I knew there was something weird when I mentioned detectives and stuff... If he's another ex like yours..."

Cam chuckled quietly. His asshole ex, Nathan, had tried to call him twice after he'd gotten together with Noah. He'd ignored both calls and blocked his number not long afterward under Jackson's advice, but it hadn't really been necessary. He just didn't give a crap about the guy anymore. He'd stopped caring after meeting Noah.

God, Noah had changed everything for him.

What if Alex could be that guy for Thomas? Nah, it seemed ridiculous from even the little they knew of him.

"I hope he's not trying to screw with Thomas now. Thomas always hid everything from us, and... he did say there was someone..."

Cam's stomach twisted. Sure, he didn't care about Nathan now, but it had taken him a long time to get to that point and multiple breakups with him. Exes might be Thomas's weak spot and they'd never know. "If he's getting him into trouble at work we'll find out and figure it out."

Noah sighed. "You two are being a little defensive."

Cam blinked and looked at him. He wasn't expecting his own boyfriend to chide him, even if his tone was gentle.

"You're charging in like bulls in a china shop. Thomas is only barely talking to us. If something *is* wrong with this Alex, he'll tell us now that we know about the two of them – unless you scare him off."

Jackson was nodding; he saw as well as Cam where this was going.

“And if he *isn't* as much of an asshole as we think from our very limited exposure to him, well,” Noah flourished his hand. “So much the better. Romance at last.”

Romance? Ridiculous.

“Wait,” Cam whispered, sitting up straighter. “No, wait. Alex studied with Thomas before. I forgot 'til now, but... he mentioned an Alex. He only talked about hanging out a couple times, but... there *was* an Alex. If it's the same one...”

“There are only a dozen Alexes in each graduating class,” Jackson muttered.

Cam shook his head. Something told him that his intuition wasn't wrong. The way they'd watched each other in those fleeting seconds... It was like there was a mutual secret.

“I think they were dating... or they are now. Could've been unrequited back then, who knows?” Jackson frowned. “But yeah, Noah, you're probably right. Unfortunately.”

Noah laughed. “Cam says that a lot, too,” he winked.

Cam pulled Noah onto his lap and slipped an arm around his waist, squeezing him in a quick hug. “Thanks for the voice of reason.”

“You're welcome.”

“God, I want a beer,” Jackson snorted. “Anyone else?”

Cam frowned. He'd had one earlier and he was limiting himself to a single drink no more than three times a week until he cut down on his beta blockers. “Not 'til the doctors say so. Maybe pop, if you're going for one.”

“Hey, but look up,” Noah smiled, twisting sideways to see Cam's face. “That was pretty stressful and you didn't even look dizzy.”

*Oh, yeah.* Cam slowly smiled back and shook his head. “I wasn't.” Before surgery, he would have had to at least sit down for a bit afterward and get his heart rate down. At worst, he might have passed out right in front of Alex.

“That's good news,” Noah smiled and kissed him. He stood up to grab a beer for Jackson and pop for himself and Cam.

Cam exchanged looks with Jackson, who at least looked calmer than

he did earlier. The stress on his face over what was going on with Chase right now still showed, though.

“They’ll be back any time now,” Cam assured his older brother. “If not Alex, Thomas will make sure of that.”

Jackson relaxed a little more and nodded. “Any time now,” he agreed, taking his beer from Noah before Noah settled on the arm of Cam’s chair again. “And cheers to another successful heart test.”

They raised their drinks to that, then settled back to wait.

Alex

It wasn't hard to feel the awkward silence in the car. With Chase in the front seat and Thomas behind him, Alex didn't especially want to start polite conversation. Chase had other things to worry about, after all.

"Where's he staying?" Chase finally asked as they waited at a light.

"The motel on the river."

"Oh, that tacky old one?"

Alex half-smiled. *Don't tell George that.* "Yeah."

"Eugh," Chase muttered. He turned to glance at Thomas, then looked at Alex; it was easy to tell what he was thinking. "You two know each other then."

Alex's gaze flickered to the rear-view mirror. He just nodded, focusing on pulling out into traffic again.

"We dated in high school," Thomas said.

Alex's foot nearly slipped off the gas pedal. *Holy Christ.* To his knowledge, this was the first time Thomas had ever told anyone else that they were dating or had dated. And it wasn't even his own brother he'd just told.

He adjusted his heel and checked his mirrors, licking his lips.

"Oh, right," Chase answered, glancing between them again. "I didn't know that, sorry." The clear implication was *do your brothers know?*

"No reason you should. Nobody else knew," Thomas chuckled quietly.

"Ah."

After a few moments, Chase looked at Alex again. "And you... investigated Cam, too? I couldn't really make out what that was about."

"Er, yeah." Alex chuckled awkwardly. "I took a case where I was investigating whether he was moving back here to play hockey for the



new minor league team instead of quitting, as the media had been told.”

“Oh.”

“For the record,” Alex said, glancing briefly at Thomas, “I told them he was out. It was my professional opinion his amateur league was for fun and that he really was disabled.”

Thomas nodded slightly.

“But they didn't believe that,” he explained to Chase. “I arranged a meeting, and from what I heard Cam... fainted afterward, so Cam and Noah hold me at fault for that. Which I can't completely disagree with.”

“So you investigate disability claims?” Chase asked. “That's what all that was about?”

“More or less. Since then, I've stopped taking those cases. They're very lucrative, but... there's so much potential to make a wrong call. I could say he was able-bodied because he was playing in that league if I were working for his insurer, even though he was pushing his limits to do so. I would never know that. I might say someone's fine when they're using the last of their strength to go out and do errands...”

“Ahh,” Chase murmured awkwardly. “Wow, I never realized that. They really hire people to check them out?”

“Not every claim, but yeah, a lot of them. I think... some of them are denied for pretty bullshit reasons now that I know both sides of it,” Alex admitted. “They only prosecute for fraud in extreme cases and I've never been involved with anything that wasn't a clear fraud, but... there's always that potential.” He felt Thomas quietly watching from the backseat and cleared his throat. “Almost there.”

“At the motel?”

“Yep. Anything you want me to do or not do?” Alex asked, his hands tightening on the wheel. “Thomas or Chase?”

“It's not my bone to pick,” Thomas told him. “Chase?”

Chase looked hesitant. “Not... exactly. I just don't want them around. That's all. No matter what he tries to manipulate me with.”

Alex nodded and shut off the car as he pulled into the guest parking space. He reached out to rest a hand lightly on Chase's shoulder.

Chase seemed surprised, then grateful as he glanced over to Alex.

“You don't *have* to come in...”

“I really don't mind,” Alex assured him quietly. It wasn't the worst he'd ever seen, and he really fucking hated the idea that he'd ever led Chase's family to find him. Given his time back, he never would have taken that job either.

Jesus, he was gonna be out of work soon if he kept avoiding cases.

Chase nodded, steeled himself, and climbed out of the car. As soon as he did, Alex and Thomas climbed out of the other side and Alex exchanged looks with Thomas. “Nothing threatening or dangerous,” Alex warned him quietly. “Do you really want to come with? You can wait here.”

“I'm coming,” Thomas told him firmly, but he brushed his hand lightly down Alex's arm.

Alex accompanied the men around the side of the building to the motel room Chase's dad was staying in. “I don't know for sure he isn't armed,” Alex warned them. “I did a quick check earlier while I was here and I didn't see any signs, but... Has he ever used or owned weapons, Chase?”

“No. No, nothing,” Chase shook his head. “I'm... I'm sure he wouldn't...” he trailed off. The hesitance that crept in at the end of his sentence made even Alex's nerves spark with anger. “I don't think he'd be dangerous.”

“Okay,” Alex told him calmly. “But let me stay closer to him first.”

When Chase nodded, Alex knocked on the motel room door.

Mark opened it seconds later, scanning Alex's face with a grimace of displeasure before his gaze landed on Chase's face. His whole expression warmed up, but Alex saw through it to the underlying emotions. It was safe to say the other two did, too.

“My boy. Come on in.”

“I don't need to come in,” Chase told him flatly. “I just need to stand here and tell you I don't want to see you again, unless you've come to apologize.”

“Charlie, I came to talk to you about--”

“You *start* with the apology if you're here with one,” Alex told him sharply. “And his name is Chase now.”

“*Charlie*, I'd happily speak to you in private,” Mark emphasized,

clearly trying to ignore Alex.

Chase scoffed. “You talk to me here or never.”

Mark seemed taken aback by his son's attitude. He scanned Chase's face as if looking for something he recognized.

“I told Uncle Jerry the same thing. I want nothing to do with any of you, even if you *were* to apologize. You screamed about the devil to me and made life a living hell in the meantime.”

“But your brother – Luke misses you.”

Alex shook his head and interrupted again. “You can't impose conditions on this if you're offering a chance for Chase to see him again.” It was painful to see the hope in Chase's eyes. “You accept Chase as a visitor for Luke the way he is or there's no deal.”

His chest quickly rising and falling, Chase nodded and looked back at his father. “What he said. I'm not going to hide who I am to see Luke.”

Mark scowled and shook his head. His expression was ugly now, that false smile gone already. “I can't let you influence him like *that*.”

“Then here's the final answer, and you can tell this to *everyone* in the family, like I told Uncle Jerry to,” Chase said, his voice hard again. That hope gone from his eyes, all civility was gone from his voice now, too. “No-strings-attached contact with Luke and a sincere apology from all of you. Until then, you don't contact me or look me up in any way.”

Alex was blown away by how clearly and forcefully Chase spoke. He'd been in a few stand-offs between spouses, family members, and even bosses and employees. Not many victims confronted their past so eloquently with almost no warning.

“And if you do contact him again without following those conditions, I'll help him get a restraining order,” Alex told him. “You know what I do. I know the process *very* well.”

Mark shook his head. “I guess he was right about you.” The disappointment in his voice was such a transparent attempt to manipulate Chase that Alex laughed. “You're beyond hope.”

“I'm the fag you never wanted,” Chase agreed with a bright smile. “And I love it.”

Mark's eyes flickered between Thomas and Chase. Thomas was pretty easy for anyone to pick out as gay – or so Alex thought. There was no doubt Mark thought they were involved now. “You two? You're not

the one Jerry told me about,” he glared at Thomas.

Thomas looked taken aback. “A man can be gay without fucking everyone around him. Rude. I'm involved with Alex, actually. Not that it's any of *your* business.”

Alex restrained his laughter at Thomas's sudden bad language. He stored away his moment of joy at Thomas's bluff... or, perhaps, not even a bluff. “We're going now. If any of you change your mind, call me first. If you show up in town again, we'll take legal action. C'mon.”

Mark was silent, but his knuckles were white as he gripped the edge of the door. It was almost disconcerting the way he watched the three of them walk to the car.

Just before they rounded the corner, Alex glanced back and saw it: the fight went out of Chase's father. His hand slid down the door to rest on the door handle instead, his shoulders slumping. Then, he leaned against the door to close it.

*Chase won.*

Alex didn't say anything until they reached the car.

“You get in the front,” Chase encouraged Thomas.

“You sure? I can sit back here with you--”

Chase laughed quietly and half-hugged him. “I don't need to be minded,” he assured him simply. “I'm not shedding any tears over people who aren't worth it. Sit up front with the man you're involved with.”

Thomas blushed at the teasing. He almost slipped on ice in his haste to get into the passenger seat.

Alex grinned at Chase, then waited for him to get in before climbing in and starting up the car. With any luck, the drive back would be a lot less awkward.

His heart was warm at the protectiveness Thomas showed toward Chase, though. And earlier, even though Chase wasn't their blood relative or even boyfriend, Cam and Noah had been protective of him. Jackson, of course, had been like a bear sheltering his cub.

More than anything, Alex wanted to feel that kind of warmth and bond. Would the Rileys ever let him in?

Thomas

“Was it your guilty conscience?”

Thomas's jaw dropped as he twisted in his seat to look at Chase, then at Alex.

Even Alex seemed startled at Chase's direct question. “Wait, what?”

“That made you... want to help me out like this,” Chase said.

Alex glanced over at Thomas, his lips quirking up. “Well, he doesn't beat around the bush, does he?” He looked in the rear-view mirror for a moment, keeping his eyes mostly on the road. “I suppose at first, yeah.”

“At first?” Chase looked curious, not accusatory.

Alex nodded, rubbing the wheel with his thumb. “Yeah. I felt bad about putting you in danger from them again. But now... I'm genuinely interested in you... especially 'cause you're Thomas's family.”

*Oh.* A little shiver ran down Thomas's spine as he watched Alex speak.

“I want to help them out, and...” Alex trailed off.

He slowed the car down as he approached a line of waiting cars at a light. At last, Alex's eyes flickered over to Thomas. His hand rested on the gear shift, his thumb tapping the stick with a subtle hint of nervousness.

Wisely, Chase didn't interrupt the moment. He busied himself looking out the window.

Thomas licked his lips, then reached over to rest his hand on Alex's. He wordlessly smiled.

Alex relaxed again and smiled back. The light turned green and he kept his hand on the shift as he pulled away again.

At last, as they pulled into the Rileys' neighborhood, Thomas spoke up again. “Thank you for helping. That was really... really appreciated.”

“No problem,” Alex said softly. “Glad to help out.”

“Did you mean it, about the restraining order?”

Alex nodded. “I can help you, if it comes to it.” His grip on the shift tightened as they turned an icy corner, then relaxed again. “But don’t worry about that yet. It’s a long way to go before that happens. I don’t think your dad will be back in town any time soon.”

Thomas hoped he was right. Alex had seemed authoritative and a little intimidating without actually uttering any threats. Come to think of it, he’d defused the situation perfectly. How much experience did he have with that? The thought of Alex standing off against assholes like that Mark without backing down...

It was a little hot, actually.

Thomas cleared his throat, then unbuckled as Alex parked by the curb.

The front door was already open, all three men in the doorway as they clambered out of the car and onto the snowy road with the crunch and squeak of boots. Their breath hung thick in the air, the temperature having dropped even further.

Chase led the way back to the house and Jackson pushed past Cam and Noah to step out onto the porch. “Hey,” Jackson greeted, his expression clearly fraught with worry. “How did it go? Are you okay?”

Thomas saw the rounding of Chase’s cheeks even from an angle behind him. Chase smiled and stepped up onto the porch and into his arms. “I’m fine,” he assured Jackson. “Thanks to Alex.”

Alex rubbed a hand over his face and shrugged casually, deflecting the praise he deserved. Thomas wasn’t even sure he’d have thought of what to say and how to say it. “You did incredibly well.” He glanced at Jackson. “I doubt they’re coming back. The terms are... well, Chase can tell you.”

Jackson led Chase inside with a nod, already focused on his lover again. “What are the conditions? Did he seem like he was gone?”

Cam and Noah stepped aside to let them past, then watched Thomas and Alex.

Thomas’s cheeks burned as he felt the attention. He climbed onto the first step up to the porch, then turned around to face Alex. Alex stayed where he was just in front of the stairs, scuffing a foot on the ground. “Thank you for the help and the warning.”

“No problem.” Alex turned away to head to his car again.

*Be bold.* Thomas stepped down and grabbed Alex's arm to stop him. His heart raced. "I... actually, do you want to stay for supper?"

Alex's surprise was very evident. He stared at Thomas for a moment, then stepped closer so Thomas could drop his hand from his arm. "If you'd like me to."

"I'm inviting you in." Thomas's heart was in his throat with nervous anticipation. He was speaking about more than just the meal.

Alex could tell; his eyes flicked rapidly between Thomas's as he examined his face. Finally, Alex relaxed into a smile. "I'd love to." He reached out slowly, tentatively, to take Thomas's hand.

Thomas couldn't help it; he looked behind him to the doorway first.

Noah and Cam were gone, leaving them to their moment of privacy.

Alex's expression flickered as he noticed the moment of distraction and he dropped his hand with a little smile. He strode up to the porch and past Thomas on the stairs to head inside as Thomas followed.

*One step at a time*, Thomas thought. At least Alex seemed to accept his hesitance easily enough. He just hoped Alex was patient enough to stick around until he had everything sorted out.

And, god, he hoped his brothers could get along with Alex now.

Alex

As Jackson and Chase sat close together at the dining room table, their voices low, the others gave them a minute or two of privacy. Noah fetched the condiments while Thomas set the table with placemats and utensils.

"Anyone want drinks?" Cam asked.

He memorized the orders as everyone spoke up with their choice of drink – beer, pop, or water. Alex went along with Thomas and asked for water. It seemed like a safe bet. "I'll give you a hand," Alex offered once everyone had spoken up.

"Thanks."

As Cam filled up glasses with pop or water and fetched two beers, Alex leaned on the counter next to him. "I wanted to say sorry to you one-on-one," Alex told him lowly.

"No, you don't have to."

Alex was surprised at how simple and sincere Cam's answer was. It wasn't passive-aggressive like he might have expected. "Wh-What?"

"You were doing your job. I get that, man," Cam laughed. "I might have been annoyed, but you didn't break any laws. You got out of my face when I told you to. You didn't personally knock me out. My boyfriend's a little more annoyed, but he'll get past it."

Alex relaxed and smiled back. "Okay, cool. Just for what it's worth, I'm not taking that kind of job anymore."

"Oh, really?" Cam pushed a couple water glasses over to him. "Why not?"

"Um..." He stalled for a moment. "Just, it doesn't feel right. I was talking to Thomas and Chase in the car about it. Too much potential for me to make a bad call and hurt people. I got into this to help them."

Cam nodded. "You made the right call, whatever you said to them. I'm in a way better place now. Still miss the sport like hell, but..."



“Yeah,” Alex sympathized. “I heard you got fixed up though. Any chance...?”

“Maybe.” Cam's eyes were bright and uncertain. “I... um, I *could*. It depends on how the next few months go. They gotta test me again. If I ever collapse again, though, it's an ICD. And most teams won't want that kind of liability.”

“Right, right.” Alex fidgeted with his arm hairs, his chin on his fist.

Cam poured a pop for himself and Noah, then grabbed beers for Jackson and Chase. “The million dollar question... how do you know Thomas?”

Alex smiled sheepishly. *He told Chase now, so... I'm assuming it's fine...*  
“We dated in high school.”

Cam's brows raised. He seemed stunned for a moment, but he recovered and nodded. “Right. Well, I hope you two work things out.”

“What do you mean?”

“It's clear there's some issues right now,” Cam chuckled quietly. “The way the two of you look at each other, though... There's chemistry. It's amazing. I've never seen it in him before.”

Alex couldn't remember the last time he'd blushed. His cheeks felt hot, and he knew his face was turning red. He grabbed the two waters and a pop, balancing the three glasses in his hands. “R-Right. “Thanks.”

*Is he really that quiet about his dating life around his brothers? Why?* To him, that was the million-dollar question, but it was one Thomas had to figure out himself.

Alex carried the glasses to the table, ignoring Thomas's curious look at his doubtless red face. To kill a few moments, he busied himself looking around at Jackson's gorgeous living room. Custom carpentry, metal art, and well-chosen paint colors made the house an oasis – far nicer than it even looked outside.

Then, Noah was pulling him aside as he brushed past him. “Hey, can we have a word later?”

Alex's stomach jolted with nerves and he nodded. “Of course.” *He probably wants his chance to chew me out.*

Jackson clapped his hands together. He was now in the kitchen, pulling plates out of the oven as Chase carried them to the table. “Let's eat.”

---

“When does the Fiddleheads' training camp start?”

From what Alex gathered, the new team was the same one that had tried to recruit Cam. They seemed like a pretty big deal, but not part of the major leagues.

He didn't know a hell of a lot about the minor leagues – only the major teams. There were two especially hot teams in the Atlantic Provinces – Montreal versus Toronto. Everyone supported one or the other.

“April. I haven't heard who their coach is, though,” Cam shook his head. “I was talking to Matty the other day about it. They have to announce it soon.”

“How's Matty doing?” Jackson asked, his voice careful. About what, Alex had no idea.

“Pretty good. He's not getting a lot of ice time yet, but they seem happy with him so far. And he's loving the money,” Cam laughed.

“I bet,” Thomas nodded. “They ever gonna come out and see you?”

“The whole team? They'd have to commandeer the bus,” Cam grinned. “But maybe Matty and a couple of the others. Or I might go see them when I have my next follow-up appointment, if they're playing near home.”

“I wonder if Kevin will be signed,” Noah frowned. “Does it work that way?”

“It could. It'd be a smart move. He's worth attracting if they can convince him,” Cam nodded. “I'm still not a fan of the owners after what they pulled with me...”

Everyone was trying not to look at Alex. He quietly ate his last grilled green bean and listened.

“Yeah, but if the coach is decent...” Jackson shrugged. “Would you ever consider it?”

Cam leaned back in his chair for a few moments. “No. I'm... I'm done now. Now that I've been out for so long, even though the reason was shitty, I've... done so much more than I did there. I might have done more, but there's hundreds of other guys out there dreaming of getting bigger. None of us are gonna be the new 99.”

Alex half-smiled. *Jesus, sounds like the wisdom of an older guy but he's my age.* "I think... there's that kind of pressure to be, and it could be pretty crushing sooner or later for most guys there."

Jackson glanced over at him and nodded. "Yeah, it can't be healthy."

"Yeah," Cam agreed. "You're exactly right. I can be way more effective here doing odd jobs and beekeeping and maybe picking up new skills than chasing a dream of making millions."

Thomas looked sympathetic. "You've been doing incredible work on all of our houses. Sneaking off sometimes to do it, but..."

Cam laughed and glanced at Alex. "I wasn't supposed to do any physical labor until this week, but I snuck a bit in here and there."

Alex grinned and nodded. That sounded exactly in character.

"It's a miracle he never killed himself," Noah muttered, fidgeting with his used utensils.

"Oh, come on," Cam grinned, slinging his arm around Noah's shoulders. "I'd have gone crazy lying in bed for weeks. And it was only a minor surgery."

"I think most people would disagree," Jackson laughed, pushing back his chair to gather dishes. "Anyway, we're all glad that's done now. Alex, you want another drink? A beer?"

Alex smiled, his eyes flickering to Noah pointedly. "No, thanks. Just stepping out for some fresh air, do you mind?"

"The back porch is shoveled," Noah told him. "I'll keep you company."

There was a moment's awkward silence where Cam eyed Noah as if wondering if he was going to yell at Alex. Alex wasn't really sure about that himself.

Nonetheless, they let the two of them head to the back porch.

"That wasn't obvious at all," Noah snorted when the door slid closed and they shuffled close to the house. He pulled up a pair of dry lawn chairs and dropped into one.

"No," Alex agreed, grinning. "Just tell them you were yelling at me. That's what you're doing, right?"

Noah looked uncomfortable. "Not exactly. Actually..." He was swallowing his pride, so Alex gave him a moment of quiet to compose himself. "I want a word of advice." His lisp was even gone, his speech

careful and proper.

Alex sat up straighter, knowing what this meant. "Professionally?"

Noah nodded. "If you... don't mind."

"Nope," Alex shrugged. "Go for it." He had a surprising number of people ask him everything from legal to medical questions. Being an investigator seemed to make people think he was an expert on every topic. He often had to turn away questions, but there were some he could help with.

"I found Cam's name on some gossip sites and... I don't know if I can get them taken down."

Alex winced and turned to face Noah, pressing his hands between his knees to keep them warm. "What sites?"

"Gay rumor sites. Cam has this asshole ex..."

"I know." Alex had found that out in his extensive research on the man.

Noah looked shocked for a few moments, then cleared his throat and nodded. "Right. Nathan?"

"Yeah."

"He sold their story to some online site. Crappy little gay news site or something. I know he doesn't search for himself because he's worried about what people think about his... medical stuff... but."

Alex hissed through his teeth and leaned back. "So he doesn't know yet?"

"Yeah."

"You gotta tell him," Alex told him bluntly. "If you want my straight-up advice, that is. Someone he knows might Google him, you know? How bad is it? Is it true?"

"I... don't know how much is." Noah shook his head. "Asshole. I always knew he wasn't quite done. He... *apparently* he's notorious for trying to get back together with him. And Jackson got Cam to block his number, so he wouldn't have been able to get in touch if he were trying. Then he probably got pissed..."

"And sold the story," Alex finished. "Yep. Very plausible. Short answer, there's probably nothing you can do. The longer legal answer is that he might have some kind of libel case, but it's rarely worth

taking it to court. You deal with really nasty stuff then. I've been in a lot of court rooms, and..." Alex trailed off. He couldn't really communicate the realities without sounding like he was fear mongering. "Believe me, it's absolutely shitty even when you're in the right."

Noah looked deflated.

Alex softened his voice to get Noah to look at him. "Listen. A lot of people, even minor celebrities, have this happen. Rumors on message boards, anonymous tweets, the whole nine yards. Nine times out of ten, when you react, you make it worse. Just talk to him about whatever concerns you – you know, if there's anything in there you're worried about it. And let it go. Do the others know?"

Noah shook his head.

Alex's heart warmed. Noah had at least a *little* belief in him, in order to confide in him. Or he was desperate. Maybe both. "Okay. Well, tell Cam first and let him decide if he tells the others, okay? Let me know if you need legal advice and I can put you in touch with people."

Noah looked grateful, then clicked his tongue. "Jesus," he murmured.

"Cons of dating an ex-celebrity," Alex winked. "But hey, if he has fans, they're not gonna be fazed. Every hockey player's got some kind of gay rumor."

Noah chuckled quietly, then rose to his feet. The night was too cold to stay out gossiping for long. "Okay. Thanks for your help."

Alex reached out to offer his hand to shake, searching Noah's eyes. He hoped this was an offer of friendship. Noah took it and shook. His grip was loose, but he smiled.

"I gotta get going soon," Alex told him and Noah glanced inside, then nodded.

They rejoined the others and there was another moment of silence, so Alex cleared his throat. "Thanks for having me over, guys. I better get going."

There was a moment of silence where Chase and Cam both glanced at Thomas while Noah and Jackson pointedly didn't.

*Oh, man. I gotta talk to him about this tonight.*

"Can I see you out?" Thomas asked.

"Of course." Alex's heart raced as he stood up and joined Thomas,

ready to head out the front door. Thomas shoved his shoes and jacket on, then waved to his brothers. "See you guys later."

"See you," Cam waved.

"Thanks for visiting," Jackson told Alex, pausing to catch his eyes. "And staying for supper. Come over again sometime, if you want."

Alex didn't miss that invitation. He glowed a little as he smiled back. "I will," he promised. "Thanks for having me. Supper was great."

Chase paused to catch Alex, too. He leaned in for a quick hug and murmured, "Thanks."

"Of course," Alex answered sincerely. "Call me anytime."

Then, Thomas opened the door for Alex and led him through the crisp night to his own house right next door.

Thomas

“Want anything to drink?”

“You and your brothers are just plying me with drinks, aren't you?” Alex grinned, flopping onto the living room couch.

Thomas laughed. “Sorry, it's automatic.” His nerves were fluttering as he joined Alex, sitting close to him and finally reaching out to touch his hand. “How was supper?”

“It was great.” Alex seemed to mean that. “They really... accepted me. I definitely didn't expect that.”

“They're a good bunch. None of them hold grudges – well, no, maybe Noah a bit, though he doesn't look it,” Thomas corrected himself. “Was he okay?”

“Yep,” Alex assured him with a slight smile. Then, Alex took his hand and caught his eyes. “Do you?”

That was a hard question, and it cut straight to the heart of what they had to talk about. Thomas drew a breath and let it out, then shook his head. “I have before, yeah, but... not anymore.”

“You're okay with me now?”

Thomas almost shivered with nerves. His toe tapped on the floor. “Yeah. I... My family forgives you, and they had way more right to be pissed at you than I did. And back then, you needed different things than me. Dumping me made sense.”

“I chose a shitty way of doing it, though.”

“Yeah,” Thomas chuckled quietly. “But we were both young. If you dump me again, though, tell me to my face and don't move away right afterward, huh?”

Alex chuckled quietly, but his gaze was fixed on Thomas's. “Deal. But I don't think that'll be a problem.”

Oh. Thomas blushed under Alex's scrutiny but screwed up his courage. “I... I gotta talk to my family about this, though. I told Chase about us...”

“None of them knew?”

“No.”

Alex nodded slowly, his gaze flickering between Thomas's eyes. “That's a big conversation. Are you ready for it?”

“Fuck, no,” Thomas laughed quietly, his heart clenching. It wasn't like he was in *danger*, but... Christ, it was too hard to explain. He just shook his head. “But I know you need to date someone who's out.”

Alex nodded. “My parents know about me. They'll want to meet my boyfriend. I want to be able to go out in public holding my boyfriend's hand.” His fingers slid between Thomas's and he squeezed his hand lightly. “I better understand staying closeted now, but I still personally... can't maintain that. I... I told you I slept with guys for work, didn't I? I was actually a honey trap back in Ontario.”

“Huh?”

“A guy who seduces men to see if they're cheaters.”

Thomas's eyes widened. “Oh.” After a moment of thinking about it, he was okay with it, but his feelings were also complicated. “You don't do that anymore?”

“God, no,” Alex laughed quietly. “It also sort of... jaded me. I can't do under-the-table relationships again.”

Thomas understood instantly. Seeing Cam and Noah glow with joy when they did something as mundane as shoveling snow together, watching Chase tidy up after Jackson in the workshop... Every little experience he'd shied away from now seemed that much more appealing.

Damn it, he deserved that, too. And so did Alex. They deserved that... together. Thomas's heart soared.

Thomas's nerves crackled as Alex's fingers slowly rubbed against his palm. Alex massaged as he went, stroking the side of his thumb.

“So, is this just a booty call?” Alex murmured, his voice barely audible as he watched Thomas without looking away. “Or is it becoming more? I know what I'm feeling.”

Thomas swallowed hard. “It's more, but... can we talk about this later? I need to talk to my family first. There's a lot of things I... never told them.”

Instantly sympathetic, Alex nodded. “I understand. For what it's



worth, I'm willing to wait a little while until you sort that out.”

Thomas's lips parted with surprise and no small measure of delight at how easily Alex said it. Christ, maybe it *had* been him blocking Alex's attempts at rekindling romance all along. Not just *maybe*. It almost certainly was.

“I know,” Alex laughed quietly. “You remember me as the last person who's likely to date or wait around for you. But I *do* want to do better, because you deserve better. And you bring out better in me.”

Thomas nodded slowly. “Okay. All right, that's...” He was glowing, a smile bursting across his face. “That's really neat. Nice. Cool.”

He was almost stuttering with how pleased he was.

Alex chuckled, then raised Thomas's hand to his lips for a quick, sensual kiss of his palm, his eyes still on Thomas's.

Thomas licked his lips and grabbed Alex's hand. “Come upstairs.”

For the second time that night, Alex accepted his invitation with a smile. He let Thomas pull him to his feet and guide him upstairs to the bedroom, his eyes on Thomas the whole time.

Thomas pushed the door shut behind them, then turned to Alex and took both his hands. He sidled closer to Alex and leaned in to press a long, slow kiss against Alex's lips.

Alex's lashes fluttered shut over those ridiculously gorgeous eyes and he parted his lips to let Thomas caress them with his own.

Thomas moaned and pressed into Alex, letting go of his hands to grab his hip with one hand. His other ran up Alex's sturdy back to the back of his neck, playing with the short hairs there. Alex was pushing forward, his lips surging against Thomas's as he gripped Thomas's hips hard and ground against him.

Oh, fuck, that set off a fire under Thomas's skin that couldn't be quenched. He growled under his breath and shoved Alex toward the bed. Alex paused to laugh, then grabbed him by the waist and pulled him onto the bed.

They were going faster this time, need clearly burning through them both. Alex hungrily undressed Thomas with his eyes and then his hands while Thomas slapped his hands away whenever he needed to yank Alex's clothes off.

“You're so forceful,” Alex teased. “I like a man who knows what he wants.”

They were naked, bare skin against skin, so Thomas relaxed and grinned up at Alex. "Makes it easier on you."

"It sure does." Alex knelt back over Thomas's thighs and knees, gazing up and down Thomas's body. Then, he reached out to run one finger down Thomas's chest toward his groin.

Thomas's cock was already hard. He sucked in a breath at the ripples of sensation under his skin from one simple but meaningful touch. When Alex reached the hair at the base of his cock, he circled around to tickle his inner thigh instead.

"Fuck," Thomas muttered, curling his toes into the bed. "Little fucker."

Alex laughed richly. "Oh, are you complaining?" He lifted his finger from bare skin and Thomas arched involuntarily off the bed, half-desperate for *any touch* to his red-hot skin.

"No," Thomas moaned, grabbing Alex's wrist to pull his hand back down to his cock.

Alex laughed and wrapped his hand dutifully around Thomas's cock. The way he handled him was so familiar and so... well, gentle, but not in a displeasing way. Thomas liked the grip firm, so that was what Alex was doing.

"That's it," Thomas whispered, his eyes drifting closed as he enjoyed the brief ring of tightness around his shaft. It slid down to the base and he moaned his approval. "You remember."

"I remember everything about you. All the things that made you gasp..." Alex twisted his hand around the top of Thomas's cock.

Thomas wasn't even trying to be funny – he gasped, right on cue. His head spun as the nerves under his throbbing cock flared with pleasure. "Y-Yeah..."

"And everything that made you squirm..." Alex pushed his hand down, twisting again to rub with his thumb. He hit the spot near the tip of his cock where skin pulled tight. It was a little button of pleasure, and Thomas resisted the urge to writhe for more.

"Christ, I didn't say come to bed to torture me," Thomas moaned.

"You're enjoying it, though. Little pre-come there," Alex teased. "But you do get wet pretty quick..."

"Filthy mouth," Thomas murmured, his cheeks burning. "Always liked that. Come on. Kiss me with that mouth. Put it to good use."

"I remember that, too." Alex crouched over Thomas and braced himself with his other arm, still slowly stroking Thomas's cock while kissing him like a porn star.

Better, even.

His lips were hot and wet and sensual, his tongue teased at the tip of Thomas's. When he sucked on Thomas's lip, Thomas's groan echoed against Alex's lips. Thomas's lips were already tingling and sensitive, but Alex wouldn't stop kissing them while stroking his hand slowly up and down the gradually slicker shaft.

"Y-You can't just... jerk me off," Thomas moaned his protest after a minute. His cock was fully hard and throbbing now in the air above his stomach, and Alex wasn't stopping stroking. He was kind of worried he'd wind up coming before Alex even got to town.

Alex breathed against his lips, "What do you want instead?" He was smirking, pulling back from the kiss slightly.

Thomas moaned his protest at being made to ask for it. He rolled his head back and Alex's lips instantly fell to his throat. Those lips – that distracting, skilled tongue – even the gentlest graze of teeth against his skin... All the while, the slow, firm grip slid up and down his shaft. Alex was bringing him along, not too fast, not too slow.

Thomas had never been with a guy who could give him this kind of sensual handjob and not make him want to kick him in the face. Thomas was *almost* willing to let Alex go the whole way with it, but also... no.

"F-Fuck, you're a cocky bastard," Thomas moaned and Alex's chuckle vibrated against the side of his neck where he was currently kissing and sucking. His lips still tingled as he gasped for breath, his stomach tightening briefly with a shudder of pleasure at an extra-firm jerking motion of Alex's hand.

He was sinking into bliss already and they'd barely started.

"Make love to me," Thomas whispered, his heart pounding. "D-Doesn't have to be rough... but more than... before."

"Either way," Alex murmured, his lips on Thomas's collarbone now, "it's not just a fuck."

Thomas jerked his head in a quick nod of agreement, then moaned and thrust into the tight ring of those rough fingers. "And stop tryin' to make me come already, Jesus."

Alex laughed and finally let go. "You don't think I can get you to come multiple times tonight?"

Of course, Thomas's body hated that sudden lack of sensation. Thomas moaned quietly as he tried to bring his body back down from the disappointment. "Filthy mouth," he muttered again. He loved it, though. Alex was utterly not shy about dirty talk in bed, and it was beyond hot. Plus, he seemed to like Thomas's direct language. Some guys got really weird about it.

He kept his eyes closed as he tried hard to catch his breath, one arm above his head and the other hand on Alex's back. "Y-Yes," he moaned when Alex's lubricated fingers touched between his legs. He pushed his feet a little further up and apart against the bed.

"You may feel some slight discomfort," Alex teased. "Would you prefer me to talk like that?"

"Oh, fuck off." Thomas's cheeks heated up all over again at the first penetration. Solid, wet fingers slid into him, simulating that first burst of pleasure from a man's cock pushing up inside him all the way to the base...

And Alex's cock made him feel so full.

"Or would you rather I whisper dirty nothings?" Alex breathed into his ear, pressing his lips to Thomas's lobe and the rim of his ear. "About how tight you are, how much your eyes glaze over with *gorgeous* pleasure when I fuck you, even with my fingers? How much I can't wait to be inside you again?"

"If you like," Thomas's voice cracked near the end of the last word and he cleared his throat, then gasped again as Alex rubbed his prostate.

Little shudders and flashes of pleasure built into steady sparks, then a dull roar. His libido was back in action, even if his cock didn't have any external stimulation at this moment.

Christ, maybe he could come just from Alex's skilled hips tonight. He couldn't *wait* to find out.

"But I don't just want my fingers in you." Alex's hand was sliding away, his fingers out.

God, now Thomas felt empty inside and he swallowed most of his answering groan.

"I know," Alex whispered in response.

Thomas heard rustling from the side of the bed, then crackling closer

to his ear. He cracked his eyes open. Alex was kneeling over him on all fours still, one arm braced next to Thomas's head, as he rolled the condom down one-handed. His thumb and forefinger pinched the tip long enough to keep it in place while his other fingers manipulated it down until he could safely bring his thumb down to help out...

And the cock slowly sheathed by that length? Alex had always been a shower, not a grower, and Thomas *loved* that about him. He could be shallow about one or two things, couldn't he? He chose to think so.

"Like the view?" Alex teased.

Thomas's cheeks burned and he nodded. "Love it," he admitted quietly. "It'll be even better when you get to it."

"Oh, sorry. Am I taking too long?" Alex grinned. "Do you even edge, bro?"

Thomas burst out laughing. "Fuck off and fuck me, you big..."

All he could think of were fond words. *Sex god. Protector. Patient, determined, smart.* Alex was everything he'd been missing for years, and now even more.

"I... I want you."

Alex grinned and Thomas's eyes flickered open to see if he understood that it was more than just sex. Alex's eyes were fond enough that Thomas suspected maybe he did.

"Relax, baby. I'm here," Alex whispered, kissing Thomas's shoulder. He lined up his cock with Thomas's slick, waiting opening and pushed inside.

That one kiss seemed more affectionate than any kiss to the lips. Emotion swelled in Thomas's chest and he nodded sharply, grabbing the back of Alex's head to kiss him.

Alex's breathing was shallow and quick, his eyes distant as he pushed inside an inch at a time, until he was fully seated inside Thomas and his balls brushed the curve of Thomas's ass. Alex's arms hooked under Thomas's legs, pushing them up and a little further apart to bend him as he found just the right position.

"Yes," Thomas whispered, wishing he could hook his legs over Alex's shoulders. Maybe with skiing, he'd be flexible and strong enough for it. *That* was motivation to exercise, at least.

Alex kissed him affectionately, then sensually, and last of all, with the passion that surged through Thomas's own body. By unspoken

agreement, Alex set into a deep, slow rhythm.

It was exactly like being jerked off a few minutes ago, only so much better to have Alex *in* him, their bodies locked together in passion.

"Alex," Thomas groaned his encouragement, grabbing Alex's shoulder blades first. He ran his nails slowly down Alex's back, enjoying every ripple of muscles he felt from Alex's slow, full-body thrusts. Alex's whole body undulated with the effort he put into it.

Best of all, Alex kept glancing in his eyes and watching his face for every ounce of enjoyment. He was an attentive lover, and Thomas loved that about him too.

"God, you feel great," Alex whispered. "This is perfect."

Thomas nodded before Alex even finished speaking. "So perfect..."

Every time he pushed down to the very limit, Alex filled him up completely, then pulled back and left him feeling empty for a second before he filled him up again.

The head of his cock rubbed over Thomas's prostate with each slow, firm thrust. It made little twitches of pleasure shudder through his cock and then his stomach and chest, all the way to his fingers and toes.

God, he burned with need for Alex, but the slow pace was everything he wanted. They had plenty of time later for fast, hard fucking to try and break the bed frame. Right now... they were sharing another moment, just as intimate as last time.

Alex gently kissed Thomas while pushing inside and Thomas arched against him, wrapping his arms firmly around Alex's back. Alex's cheeks were flushed, his eyes hazy with the same pleasure he'd whispered about into Thomas's ear.

Thomas carded his fingers through his hair once more before kissing Alex's cheek and nose and forehead, then back to his lips.

Alex laughed gently, his eyes lit up with wonder. "You're so playful."

"I hope you don't mind."

"I – nnh... not at all," Alex moaned, thrusting a little harder as he shifted his angle a little. "I've laughed more with you than ever, and I... like that."

Thomas nodded hard. It wasn't just sexual satisfaction – there was deeper pleasure here that he'd missed, and a much deeper connection

than he'd ever felt to Alex before. This was an itch nobody else scratched.

He swallowed hard, then groaned at the sharper thrusts. "Yes...! You can go harder..." he whispered and was rewarded with several more kisses.

Thomas kissed blindly, his head spinning with pleasure as Alex gradually sped up his pace, still going hard and deep. Those muscled legs and arms held Alex perfectly steady even when Thomas grabbed at him.

"I'm gonna – any time now," Thomas warned. Another whimper was wrung from his lips as Alex thrust even harder, angled just right to rub inside him...

His cock was burning with desire to be touched. On the other hand, he felt so sensitive to every little brush against Alex's stomach or his own that he was positive he'd come on the spot if he were. Or maybe kick Alex.

Thomas didn't even have time to dwell on it. He gasped and shivered, his whole body tensing for a second with preparation as he felt himself hit that mental plateau right before the final climb and plunge...

"Come for me, baby," Alex whispered, kissing along his jaw and neck. "I missed you so much."

"I m-missed you too," Thomas moaned, his skin prickling with pleasant heat as Alex's chest rubbed against his and their hard nipples rubbed. Every little touch of bare skin, every brush of heat on heat seemed to multiply into a raging need for Alex...

Thomas clenched hard and rolled his head back into the pillow with another hard gasp as his muscles clenched.

"That's it, baby..."

"A-Alex... yes! Yes!" Thomas groaned. Even if he'd wanted to be shy and not vocal, there was no way he'd hold back the thoughts that whirled around his head. All were thoughts of Alex and how damn *right* this felt.

This was heaven, and he never wanted it to end.

As his body clenched and his passion squirted from deep within, he hit the moment of total focus. Every shiver of his muscles and slide of Alex's body against his only heightened the incredible sensation. Alex

deliberately shifted his body to rub his stomach against Thomas's, trapping Thomas's cock between them.

“Yes...” Thomas whispered again, his voice hoarse. Bare skin and light hairs against the sensitive flesh made him *burn* all over again. He clenched extra-hard, his arms tightening around Alex for the last few pulses of pleasure.

Then Alex was driving hard and erratically into him, his breath coming in unmistakable, gasping pants. “T-Thomas... You're fucking gorgeous. Yes...!”

Thomas grabbed Alex's ass and pulled him in as close as he could to somehow get him deeper inside as Alex thrust and shuddered and gasped. Alex's face was incredible – he was staring at Thomas, not even through him, as if Thomas were the most beautiful sight.

Thomas flushed with embarrassment and pleasure, his breathing still hard and heavy as Alex gave a final few thrusts, then eased out and stripped the condom off.

Alex rolled onto his side and pulled him in to hold him silently while Thomas buried his nose in Alex's neck. Thomas twitched now and then with pleasure, his chest and stomach warm all throughout. His head still faintly buzzed. *That was incredible.*

“Christ, you're something,” Thomas whispered.

“Thanks.” A rumble of a laugh sounded in Alex's chest, vibrating against Thomas. “That *was* goddamn perfect.”

Thomas scooted a little closer to push his thigh between Alex's legs and curl his arm under his head. “Only thing that's better...”

“Mm?” Alex pulled back enough to look him in the eye. It was easy to tell he was trying to remain calmly neutral.

Thomas grinned. “Wanna stay over tonight?” He *really* hoped his new-and-past lover would say yes. He'd hinted at it before, after all. “I work early tomorrow, though.”

“Of course,” Alex agreed instantly. “I do too. It'll be just like old times... only sexier.”

Thomas laughed quietly and rubbed Alex's chest. “If you're lucky,” he teased.

“I already got lucky.”

The sincerity of the words made Thomas's smile falter for a moment



before it came back with ten times the force. This was referencing more than their amazing sex. Alex was looking at him like he meant every damn word, not like it was one of his charming little acts.

“Shut up,” Thomas mumbled, rubbing his face and sitting up.

Alex laughed hard with surprise. “You're not usually speechless. Did your inbuilt dictionary module get wiped during all that awesome sex?”

Thomas snorted and shoved Alex's chest. “You're getting an ego, and *I'm* getting up to wash off before I ruin my sheets.”

“Heaven forbid you get a little come on them, 'cause nobody ever does that.” Alex grinned mercilessly, hauling himself up in one easy sit-up to peck Thomas's lips.

“You...” Thomas smacked Alex's shoulder again as he stood up, but they were both laughing. He let himself into the en suite and cleaned himself off a little, taking a moment to gaze in the mirror.

This was who he was now. It was easy to see the change. Even to his own eye, Thomas glowed like he'd never seen himself glow before.

He *did* want to date Alex again – even that simple realization set his heart racing. He had to face everyone else first, but... Alex was willing to wait for him this time.

Thomas knew just what Alex had meant a minute ago. He was lucky, too.

Alex

As the front door clicked shut behind him in the winter pre-dawn hours, Alex kept his steps quiet. He wasn't ashamed about leaving Thomas's house the next day, but he didn't want to attract unnecessary attention. Thomas still had to have conversations with both his brothers that might not be easier if they saw him.

Not that everyone wouldn't already know. He ruefully smiled as he unlocked his car and started it up. He shivered as he pulled on his gloves and grabbed the scraper. Luckily it hadn't even snowed, and there was just a thin layer of frost to scrape off the windshield that morning.

Alex worked quickly, laughing under his breath at the thought: if he'd wanted to make a quick getaway, lord knows he wouldn't be able to, what with Canadian weather conditions. Maybe he ought to invest in a car that would allow him to lock the doors while leaving it running in case he needed that someday after an all-night surveillance stakeout.

He climbed back in and pulled away from the curb, not spotting many other cars on the road as he drove to his place first to grab a quick shower, change of clothes, and breakfast.

He had to get started early on his next case. He'd gotten the call yesterday just before the call about Chase's father coming into town: someone's cat was missing. It would have found a warm spot to burrow for at least the first couple nights, but he only had a few nights if he wanted to be successful. They were willing to pay his ridiculous rate for the full day of searching, especially around dawn and dusk.

God, it was hard to get up early some mornings, though. While he was alone, it was way harder, though, oddly. It should have been the other way – reluctance to leave his lover versus boredom in bed alone. Instead, being alone just... didn't treat him well.

The doctor had given him a waiting list spot for therapy, and he'd have to wait at least a couple months for that. In the meantime, he intended to keep himself focused, like always, on work.

Alex had a few ideas for this case, but he'd start in the usual places. Missing pet cases were among the best to solve, or the worst, if they went cold. Especially in the winter.

His first move was to search the owner's property, looking everywhere from gaps in the shed eaves to thoroughly searching the darkness under the porch. With no results, he broadened his search, looking around and over fences to see which properties he wanted to search.

There was a time he might have just climbed over and done it without asking, but he had to do things by the book now wherever he could. And besides, one of them might have some wisdom.

*Look at me asking for help like a grownup.* Alex wryly smiled as he knocked on the first neighbor's door.

Every neighbor let him search the yard as soon as he explained what was going on, and they told him they hadn't seen any cats but would keep an eye out now. One offered to put out a box and blanket, while another offered to help search after work that night.

Then, a few houses down, one of the neighbors said something interesting.

"I think I saw an orange cat darting around a snow bank yesterday afternoon, actually. It was near the garbage shelter."

*Ohhh.* Alex's eyes widened. He hadn't even considered the shelters – large wooden boxes some people put near the end of their driveway to house their bins. Most were sealed pretty well, but if one wasn't, it would provide a neat little hiding place...

"Thanks," Alex nodded hard. "I'll follow up on that."

It took him a little while to search the nearby shelters. He didn't turn anything up, nor had he seen any paw prints, though there wasn't any newly fallen snow.

Every now and then he stepped back into his car and warmed it up, to give himself a little break from the cold as morning crept into late morning, then afternoon. He finally had to take a break to eat the sandwich he'd brought and drink some tea, though his eyes still wandered around the street as he sat in the car and watched.

He might only have one chance to spot the creature. Unlike most of his cases, this was literally life and death.

It was around two when Alex got another lead from neighbors two streets away. They said that yesterday, they'd seen something orange

going around the snow to the shed behind them, but that place was empty most of the time. They'd thought it was a trick of the sunlight since it had been sunset.

Good enough for him. Alex thanked them, and then waited until they were inside the house again before doing one more search of their yard.

When he was sure nobody was looking, he hopped over the fence to the other place. The snow hadn't been touched here since winter began, and had formed into a hard ice pack. Certainly no paw prints around, but the wooden shed was what he was most interested in anyway.

Alex stepped back to have a good look at it. The doors were jammed shut by so much snow around them, but there was a mound of snow that had blown up next to one side of the shed. When he had a closer look, he spotted a gap in the eaves.

"Aha," he whispered. He took another glance at the house, then rubbed his chin. He couldn't go about this wrong... the cat could escape one way while he searched another.

Then, Alex had a crazy little idea that made him grin.

Stepping back, he stomped on the ground until his boot broke through hard ice and snow. He bent down and scooped up the boulder-like chunk of ice and snow, then shoved it up into the gap in the eaves. Once he searched the rest of the perimeter, he found two more easy gaps and shoved snow chunks in them, too.

Now for the hard part. He had to stomp a few more times – enough that he was considering going back to his car for a shovel – before he managed to break through enough snow to kick it away from the doors.

Alex bent down and clawed with his gloves, grateful they were waterproof, to pull pieces of ice and snow away from the door. The shed was unlocked, though there was a clear spot where a padlock could be threaded to keep it locked up. He was exceptionally grateful for that – getting a cat out of a locked shed would be damn near impossible.

When he yanked on the doors, they didn't budge at first. He had to bend down and scrape at the snow again, muttering to himself about weapons laws. They weren't allowed to carry anything, just in case. That ruled out the Swiss Army knife that would have been damn handy right about now.

Still, with enough scraping that his fingers nearly went raw, even inside his gloves, he managed to get the corner free and pulled open the door again, staying low to block the cat's escape in case it tried to run for it.

Like magic, it was there and it wasn't even running or fighting.

It just meowed loudly and trotted up to him.

"Aha, I bet you smell the good stuff, huh?" Tuna salad sandwich for lunch. "I saved a bit for you..." He knelt back and pulled off a glove, ignoring the sting against his fingers, to pull out a bag of cat treats.

The cat – Joker – was already climbing on his knees. He laughed as he tried to keep its face out of the whole bag of treats. "I see why they call you Joker. Your mom's worried sick about you, you know." He fed it a couple of treats, then tucked the bag in an outside pocket and reached out to carefully scoop him up.

Just as he'd been told, Joker didn't offer any resistance. He awkwardly pulled his glove back on, the cat in his arms, then rose to his feet.

Thank god the police weren't waiting for him when he hopped back through the neighbor's yard and side yard to the street. He doubted they'd give him trouble when they learned what this was about, but it was still technically trespassing.

"Not that I care, huh?" he asked Joker, shifting him in his arms as Joker purred harder. "Hold on, gotta get you in the back seat..."

He might as well not have bothered; as soon as he climbed into the driver's seat, Joker climbed into the passenger seat and tried to nose at him for more treats.

"Oh, you're hungry, aren't you? I'm bringing you right home, buddy," he promised. "Just sit tight. Don't get underfoot. Shoulda picked up your cage first..." Kaylee had told him he wouldn't need it, and he'd believed that.

Joker sat on the driver's seat, digging in his claws as Alex pulled away. Alex kept nervously glancing over, worried that Joker would try to interfere with his driving, but Joker was more patient than he'd expected.

When he pulled up in front of the cat's house, Alex crawled backward out of the car and reached across to tempt Joker closer with a treat, then scooped him up again. He didn't bother locking his car, just keeping Joker tight against his chest as he walked carefully across the slippery street.

The door was already open by the time he was there, and his client was hugging first Joker, then him. Alex stood back with a smile, watching Joker press his head against her face before running for the food dish.

“Well, he's learned better, I hope,” Alex laughed.

“Thank you so much. Do you have your invoice now or should I pay later? I'll pay on the spot,” Kaylee offered.

“Don't worry about it. I'll email you tomorrow,” Alex told her with a smile. Her face flooded with joy again as she hugged him. “Just – enjoy being with him again.”

“I will,” Kaylee said with a sincere little smile. “If anyone else ever needs your help...”

“Feel free to pass my name along,” Alex agreed. “I can't always help, but I can do my best. Your Joker was a pretty easy one to find, at least.” He'd only bill her for seven hours, since he'd taken a few minutes off to warm himself here and there.

Alex still glowed as he drove home, marveling that it was only three in the afternoon.

His glow only faded a little when he reached his apartment and found it empty and quiet. Compared to the Rileys' houses, there weren't people around all the time. Nobody was there to greet him, and there wasn't someone friendly right next-door.

Alex smiled slightly again as he thought about supper last night. That had gone pretty damn well, all things considered.

Nobody was obligated to be around him. He had to get his own life in order. The more he did that, the more Thomas seemed drawn to him, which was a bonus.

Maybe it was time to focus his work on things he really liked: catching cheaters, finding lost pets, and just helping people. No more revenge or corporate cases.

Alex knew he made enough money doing what made him happy. He wasn't supporting an extravagant lifestyle anymore, and the cost of living here was way better. And now that he'd been working here for nearly a year, people were referring him to their friends, meaning more of the same kinds of cases he wanted. He could finally unclench his fears a little. Unlike Thomas, he didn't have bosses to navigate or please.

And Thomas... if he wanted to, Thomas would eventually come to him. His phone went off seconds later, giving him a shock. They must have been on the same wavelength for a moment.

*Hi, I had an amazing time. Do you want to come for drinks with my bros + friends tomorrow night? Then we could go to late supper and date... xx*

Alex answered fast, eager to see more of that wonderful smile.

*Me too. I'd love to see them and especially you again. What time and where?*

Thomas texted him the name of a bar downtown that Alex recognized well and told him to come at 6 p.m., dressed for a nice supper.

*Ooh. Sounds intriguing ;)*

*No sleuthing! It's a surprise.*

Alex laughed. The surprise was just which restaurant Thomas would choose, but nonetheless, it was a nice one.

Okay, he agreed. Then, he added, *Can't wait. What are you doing today?*

*Just got off work, going out to talk with my bros soon.*

Alex felt nervous on Thomas's behalf. Was this the big talk? He wasn't sure how to respond except to wish him well.

*Good luck! Have fun xx.* He scrolled through the emoticons for a minute before finding the right heart icon – the simple red one – and adding it to the end of the text. Then, he hit send.

A minute later, he had his answer: the same heart emoticon in return.

Alex smiled and pocketed his phone, trying to turn his attention to cleaning his apartment so he could burn all his nervous energy off on something useful and avoid crashing on the couch to do nothing for the next day.

Though last night felt like moments ago, tomorrow night felt like it was an eternity away. No doubt Thomas's conversations tonight would determine how tomorrow night went, and maybe many future nights.

*Be brave,* he thought to Thomas, half-wondering if he should have texted it. *You have nothing to lose... and we have everything to gain.*

Thomas

“So, Thomas, what's your answer?”

Thomas's heart thudded as he gazed across the conference table to Barry. The man's tie had a few threads out of place and it was driving him nuts. *Not the point.* He raised his eyes to Barry's now and straightened his shoulder.

This was perhaps the hardest decision he'd ever made. He'd have given anything not to give this answer.

“No, thank you.”

Barry looked stunned. “You... don't want it?”

“Not at this time. I don't think it's appropriate, given... recent events.”

Barry waved a hand. “I don't know what you mean.” He winked and Thomas's stomach twisted; he'd been right to turn it down. “This is just the most qualified man getting the job. Are you sure about that answer?” he pressed.

“I just can't do it yet, sir. I look forward to getting another offer in the future if my work merits it,” Thomas told him. “And I'd like Irma to know that this is still my goal, but not yet.”

Barry looked deflated as he nodded. “Right. Well... thank you for getting back to me.” He rose to his feet and shook hands again.

Thomas walked tall as he left the office.

“What happened?” Georgie whispered, leaning in. Sam, Chris, and Kyle were all busy serving customers, but she sat next to him and there was nobody else in line right now.

“Not much. He wanted to know what I thought about a few things,” Thomas lied. “Compared to Halifax.”

Georgie looked disappointed. “Oh. We all thought you were getting a job offer.”

Thomas's stomach lurched. *I can't tell them... can I? Would they be jealous? They might wonder why...* “Why?”



"You're obviously the best-qualified. You're young, but you've got the degree. You're really good."

Thomas's cheeks felt hot and he cleared his throat. "O-Oh. I see. Thanks. I try..."

"Take the damn compliment," she laughed and rolled back to her window, waving the next customer to enter the bank over to her window.

Thomas blushed and closed his mouth, then glanced over toward the offices. Barry was approaching Irma now, and the two of them stepped into Irma's office.

It was only a couple minutes before Barry emerged again, his coat on and briefcase in his hands.

*Oh, my god. She threw him out.* Thomas bit back his grin and nodded slightly, but he didn't look over as he passed on his way out the front door.

Irma wandered after him, leaning in the doorway of her office.

When Thomas looked over at her again, Irma offered him a slow smile and nod.

Thomas's anxiety faded instantly.

*That **was** the right thing.*

It was only later that afternoon, not long after lunch, that he brushed by her in the hall and she reached out to stop him for a moment.

"I hear you weren't ready for more responsibility this week," Irma told him with a meaningful smile. "Would next week work?"

Thomas hesitated. "As long as it's not..."

*"This meeting's with me, not that oily bastard."*

Thomas's jaw dropped. He hadn't heard that kind of language in the bank before from anyone, let alone Irma. "I..."

"Oh, don't look so shocked. We all think that about him. So, yes or no?"

"Yes," Thomas murmured, smiling back. "Thank you."

"Good job today, kid." She nodded briskly and kept on walking.

Thomas glanced after her, then slowly walked on to the break room. Irma's respect was worth ten times more to him than any offer Barry

could have made. If he was going to get an offer from Irma, he knew it was because he was the right man for the job.

Or if she just wanted to praise Thomas for turning down the offer from the “oily bastard” today, he was fine with that too. He couldn't help it; by the time he got to the break room, he was laughing about it. Maybe he should be a little more like Irma.

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Before Thomas even pulled away from the curb after work, he sent a mass text to both of his brothers.

*Hey guys, you two wanna come out to the bar with me tonight? Save our guys' night for tomorrow night instead?*

He got his responses within moments from Cam and only a minute later from Jackson. Both were enthusiastic yeses.

That left him with one person to text.

Alex's fond responses made him smile broadly as Thomas suggested a date, which was quickly accepted. He wanted to see Alex around his family and friends more. He couldn't keep these parts of his life separate, and he didn't want to.

Best of all, though, were the heart emoticons Alex sent at the end of the conversation.

Thomas's cheeks burned with pleasure as he stared at it, then sent back the same heart to Alex. He pocketed his phone and tried to calm down, but he ended up pulling it out again to have one more quick glance at it before he drove.

Alex was hinting at the same emotion that bubbled in Thomas's chest whenever he spent time around Alex... or even thought about it. Even all these years later, their feelings had never truly faded. It felt completely natural for them to be flickering back to life, but much stronger than before.

And now, Thomas was strong enough to admit it to everyone else: he was a sucker for this gorgeous detective and his better ways.

Cam

“You're kidding me.”

Cam stared at the laptop screen without really seeing it yet, still processing Noah's words. Noah had his arm around his shoulders, and he'd just told him a few words he'd never expected to hear.

Nathan was back.

Well, not really. This article was dated a couple weeks ago, but he hadn't even thought about Nathan in fuckin' *forever*.

“How dare he?” Cam whispered, finally focusing on the headline. It was sensationalistic, just as he'd expected. Some gossip blog or news site, some crap, talking about closeted gay sports stars; the piece featured Nathan's account of their relationship.

Cam scanned it and shook his head. Some of the details were right: they'd had a tumultuous off-and-on relationship, yeah. Others were *wildly* off base: the off-agains hadn't been caused by his own internalized homophobia and fear of discovery.

Christ, Nathan had spun this to make himself look like a little angel. That was probably what ground Cam's nerves more than anything.

“I can't believe he'd do this.”

“Or that he found someone to pay him, presumably.”

“Is it paid?”

Noah shrugged. “It could be for revenge. He sounded like an asshole.”

Cam pushed his laptop back and pulled Noah closer. “Yeah, he was. All that... it's half-true, but...”

“It's fine,” Noah murmured. “I believe you. You don't have to explain yourself to me.”

Cam still burned with the urge to explain: *I* wasn't dumping him; *he* refused to meet my family; yes, we fucked in a locker room once, but there was nobody else in the damn building, and it wasn't the fuckin' main Toronto arena!

He let out his breath and nodded, then looked at Noah. "How did you find out?" Then, something clicked. "You were talking to Alex..."

"I asked him what we can do," Noah murmured quietly, fidgeting with the hair at the back of Cam's head. "He told me it's pretty much nothing. Unless we sue people for libel or whatever, but he said... well, he didn't think court was fun."

"Right," Cam murmured, his thoughts still absent. Had any of his teammates heard about this? Matty would have told him, right?

He pulled out his phone and sent Matty a quick text.

*Some shitty article out online about me. Don't look it up please. But it's mostly garbage.*

Matty was still his closest friend from the minor leagues out in Toronto, though he'd been drafted to play with the big boys now.

Then, Cam looked at his boyfriend and blew out a quiet breath. "Anyway, I'm not getting back into it. Nobody I care about will think twice about the story. They all knew about us."

Noah silently nodded.

"And..." Cam trailed off thoughtfully. Matty had texted back.

*No problem man. At practice now. TTYS. We gotta Skype.*

Cam quickly answered,

*Yep we will soon. See you buddy.*

"Good, Matty's cool with it. He'll deal with everyone else if they nose around," Cam told his lover. "And Alex helped? You two are on good terms now?" He'd kind of thought Noah would be pissed off.

"I hope you don't mind--"

Cam kissed Noah to silence him, then smiled gently. "Of course I don't. If Thomas is gonna date him..."

"We don't know that," Noah reminded him.

Cam laughed. "You heard the car starting up this morning as well as I did."

"Now who's a gossip little bastard?" Noah told him off, but he was grinning, too.

"I'm just saying," Cam winked. "And now he wants to come out to the bar tonight to talk to Jackson and me."

Noah just smiled quietly, then closed the laptop lid and turned on the TV instead.

God, Cam hoped this was the beginning of Thomas opening up. It was about time, for all of their sakes. And if he was finally seeking love, about *fucking* time for his own sake.

*Please, let Alex be trustworthy.*

Alex

"How's work going?"

The question that had stressed Alex out since last year no longer held as much weight, even coming from his parents.

He could honestly answer, "Great."

"Any interesting cases?"

"Yeah. Today I did a missing cat. Found it by three o'clock. He spent last night outside, though... it's a damn good thing he found a great shelter."

"Oh, poor thing," his father frowned, setting down his knife and fork. "Good for you. Do you think business is picking up?"

"Definitely. This client found me through another client, who found me through another... I'm at three referrals deep, and I think that's the critical mass. From everything I learned in the business class at college, anyway."

Probably more useful than the classes on surveillance or the law had been the business class where private investigation students learned how to run their own businesses. Most did, though a fair number joined the bigger security services companies, too. Given his employment history, Alex hadn't exactly had a choice.

"So you think you're going strong, even not doing insurance cases anymore? They aren't the end of the world," his mother told him. Before she could gather up their dishes, Alex stood up to do it. "Oh, thank you."

"No problem." Alex stacked plates. "Yeah, it's going fine. But I'd really rather not, for now. For as long as I can get away with it. I have more inroads in personal cases now. Insurance and business cases can be steady if you do the same thing for the same firm over and over, but that's... not why I got into it."

His parents exchanged looks.

"Honestly," Alex insisted, setting the plates in the sink and returning

to their dining room table. "I'm fine. I have work and friends to keep me busy. And something else I wanted to tell you." His heart raced; this was an early announcement, so he wanted to keep it casual. He also wanted to spread the news.

"Oh?"

"There's a guy I've met. I'm sort of seeing him, we're still figuring things out, but we're interested in seriously dating."

"Oh, congratulations. Who is he? Do we know his family?" his father asked.

Alex laughed. "Dad, stop it. You'll meet him soon if he's not too shy. He's still coming to terms with everything."

"Don't get your heart broken by someone who isn't proud enough to be with you," was his mother's advice. She spoke with a frown of concern.

Alex reached over to squeeze her hand. "I won't, Mom, I promise." Ironic, though. That was just about what had happened last time... though he'd done the actual dumping, it had been after Thomas told him he wasn't coming out.

It was six of one, half a dozen of the other for their past faults. He trusted Thomas again now, and vice versa... perhaps even more strongly now that they'd hurt each other before. Broken and fixed trust ought to be weaker, he thought, but it was just the opposite.

"Good. We hope we can meet him sometime," his father followed up. "When he's ready."

"Thanks," Alex smiled. He laughed when his phone went off in his pocket, then checked the caller. *Oh, it's not him. That would have been weird, twice in a row.* He didn't know the number. "Sorry, I should take this for work."

He stepped onto the porch and shut the door, shivering as he stayed close to the house. "Hello, Alex speaking."

"H-Hi. I'm calling about your services. I actually, uh, heard about you. My buddy Chase was talking about what happened the other day. My name's Floyd."

*Floyd... I know that name. Oh!* "You own the tattoo shop he works at."

"Oh, you know me. Yes."

*Can't exactly tell him how if Chase hasn't told him I tracked him down...*

“Yes, I do. Go on.”

“I have a sort of problem. I don't know if you can help, but... in case you can.”

“Of course. Do you want to speak over the phone or in person?” It was a bit of a trick question since Floyd sounded nervous and he'd already guessed he didn't want to talk over the phone.

“In person would be great,” Floyd told him, sounding relieved.

“Is it urgent?” Alex wanted to spend the evening with his family since he'd be out tomorrow – and as many nights soon in the future as possible – with the Rileys. “Should we meet tonight?”

“No, tomorrow or whenever you're free is fine. Evening works better.”

“How about the day after tomorrow? Are you working that night?”

“I can close the shop and we can talk there, yeah. Good idea,” Floyd answered. “I'll see you then. Oh, one more thing...”

“Yeah?”

“Can you not tell the Rileys about this yet? They're my friends and all, but... especially Chase.”

“Of course. As soon as I consult with a client, confidentiality applies,” Alex told him. “That's no problem.”

Floyd sounded relieved. “Okay. Thanks, man. See you soon.”

“Bye,” Alex told him and hung up, then tapped his phone on his lips. *Very interesting*. It could be something as simple as a background check on an employee – though he doubted it, with how nervous he sounded – or it could be more.

He'd find out soon enough.



## Thomas

Thomas's hands almost shook as he carried back a couple beers from the bar to the table. "One for you, one for you, one for me."

He slid into the booth by his brothers, trying not to feel dwarfed by them. His whole life had been that way, really. They were just big and broad guys, whereas he was built like a twig. He was okay with it personally – it just made them look kinda funny when they were all out together.

"Thanks," Cam answered while Jackson nodded. Cam cradled the beer, not sipping it yet. He had to make it stretch longer, after all.

"So, I wanted to talk to you guys about... relationships and stuff. You probably guessed," Thomas laughed faintly. His stomach was twisting with anxiety, making it hard to stomach the beer.

The brothers exchanged looks and nodded. "Yeah, we did," Jackson confirmed.

"I told Chase, so I may as well tell you: I dated Alex in high school."

For a moment, none of them said a word. Thomas was holding his breath, waiting for the reaction – good or bad.

Then, Cam slapped the table and made both Jackson and Thomas jump. "*Fuck*, yes! I knew it."

Jackson punched Cam lightly. "Jesus, take a year off my life, why don't you?"

Cam laughed and shrugged, still looking triumphant. "Sorry, but I knew it. I've been waiting forever to hear that."

"You suspected?" Thomas asked.

Cam shook his head. "No real proof, if that's what you mean. You hid friggin' *everything* from us, man."

Thomas felt a little sheepish.

"Yeah, he's right. Why didn't you say?" Jackson watched Thomas closely, his expression soft and more concerned.

Thomas drew a breath and let it out, then sipped his beer to give himself a moment. He had a speech rehearsed, but it was gone now. "I... thought it was weird for us all to wind up gay."

Jackson raised his eyebrow. "Why?"

"Pretty cool, though," Cam smirked. "Triple the cool factor. Three gay families in one neighborhood! That Christian school will have to reroute their school buses..."

"Cam," Jackson laughed. "We're having a moment." Nevertheless, Thomas laughed and shook his head, too.

Cam raised his hands in apology. "Sorry."

Thomas turned back to Jackson to explain. "Um, like I was copying my big brothers or something."

"You aren't copying being gay. Do you like being in bed with him?" Cam asked.

Jackson laughed but looked at Thomas.

Thomas's cheeks heated up and he nodded. "Yeah."

"And you like being romantic and shit?"

Thomas nodded again.

"Then you're one-hundred-percent full homo milk, baby."

Jackson snorted. "I'd have put it a little gentler, man. I mean, he could still be bi."

"Oh, oops."

Thomas laughed, his tension already fading as he watched his big brothers banter. "No, it's okay. I'm not. I don't think. I don't... really feel into a lot of people, actually. But Alex was always something else."

"So back in high school..."

Thomas winced. "Yeah, that was another thing. You guys stood up for me because I wasn't gay. But really, I was..."

"No," Jackson told him firmly. "We stood up for you because you didn't deserve to be picked on, not because you were being called gay when you weren't. I don't give a crap about the bullies' factual accuracy. I gave a crap about people not being picked on for stupid shit. Or any shit, really. You little idiot," he added.

Thomas was blushing now. He rubbed a hand back through his hair and laughed, almost too flustered to say anything. "I... I don't know. I built it up into this huge thing."

"Sometimes those huge things are just completely things you invent in your head," Cam shrugged. "They still feel big. But I'm glad you came to us."

Thomas still had a nagging little fear or two, though. "But Alex, specifically?"

"What about him?"

"Don't you guys kind of resent him still? Isn't it weird for me to date *him*, of all people?"

"I never knew you cared what others thought," Jackson half-smiled, but his teasing was gentle. He was right; Thomas usually either didn't care or did a damn good job pretending he didn't.

"But no, we don't," Cam chimed in. "We talked about it afterward. He was doing his job both times. We were just worried that – you talked to Jackson about some kind of work thing, and we were worried he was somehow screwing you over."

"Who, Alex? No, no," Thomas hurried to explain.

"He wasn't investigating you or something to do with you?"

Thomas shook his head firmly. "Definitely not. He was just keeping an eye on me for a while, until I was ready to... talk to him again, I guess. We never really got over each other." It was bizarre to be admitting his feelings to his brothers, even over a beer. He couldn't quite look either of them in the eye.

"Why's that? I mean, he's your ex. Did you break up on good terms?" Cam asked. This time, Jackson looked worried.

Thomas hesitated and shook his head. "But we were a lot younger then. We talked through it all."

"Still," Jackson added. "Be careful if you decide to date your ex again."

"Of course." Thomas smiled to himself, gazing at the head settling in his beer glass. "I think I was just waiting for him to grow up, and... for me to, too. I know you don't like exes dating..."

"Just 'cause we've had bad luck doesn't mean you will," Cam said firmly, looking over at Jackson like he was soliciting agreement.

Jackson hesitantly nodded.

“Nathan was shit for a long time. I knew that *before* we broke up. The last time, I mean. You know we broke up more than once – Jesus, it must have been four, five times. It was really off-again-on-again,” Cam told them. “And last month, he sold our story to some online paper. It's only a really minor piece. You have to search for my name to find it.”

Thomas straightened up; he'd never heard this much. “Oh. What...?”

“Yeah. It's all bullshit, so I'm ignoring it. And anyway, we “mutually” broke up most of those times, but...” Cam trailed off, shaking his head. “He moved in and out. He tried to control which of my teammates I hung out with. Luckily I never cared what he wanted me to do, but if I hadn't been so pigheaded...”

Thomas shivered. “I didn't know that. I just thought he was a dick, all... weird and cold toward you. Jackson told me a little. And I didn't know it was *that* off-and-on. Fuck.”

“You gossiped about my boyfriend?” Cam grinned at Jackson.

“When you're dating a dick, that happens.”

“Fair enough,” Cam laughed. “And there was you and... Ed?”

“Oh, Christ, don't even talk about Ed,” Jackson groaned.

Thomas laughed. He remembered the man who'd moved in with Jackson just as well. They'd given a relationship two shots, the second of which was even worse than the first. They just hadn't clicked together, and after the honeymoon period of living together for a week, it had been fights all the time. He didn't like seeing Jackson like that. He was so much calmer now that Chase was around.

“But like I said, this could be different,” Cam said, looking back at Thomas.

Thomas couldn't express how grateful he was for the benefit of the doubt. He hurried to confirm, “It is.”

“Okay,” Jackson smiled, raising his beer. “Here's to that.”

They clinked glasses and sipped, Thomas's eyes flickering at last between his brothers' faces. They both seemed genuinely pleased, not pissed off at him. He felt even more stupid for waiting so many years to talk to them.

“So is it looking like you'll date again?”

*After this conversation... hell, yes.* “Yeah,” Thomas nodded. “I’d already decided I’m gonna date him again. I just wanted to tell you first.”

“Oh,” Cam laughed. “Suppose you’d better let him know next.”

Jackson joined in his laughter. “Sounds about right. There’s our stubborn Thomas back.”

Thomas grinned broadly. “Yeah. Don’t worry, I’m not roping him into anything.” Far from it – he was stepping back into Alex’s waiting arms.

He was one of the few people stubborn enough to resist Alex’s charms, deal with his bratty moments, and better yet, let Alex lead when he had to. But he was done resisting.

“I invited him to come along for supper tomorrow. I figure all our boyfriends and friends will be there. Especially if I tell them what it’s for,” Thomas grinned. “That’ll be a surprise for him.”

Jackson choked on his drink. “Oh, Jesus, you’re wicked.”

“Yeah,” Thomas agreed, grinning and sipping his beer again as he leaned back in his chair. “Just quietly so.”

“Damn right,” Cam laughed. “Try to be a little less quiet next time, eh?”

That was their way of asking Thomas to trust them with his secrets. He trusted them with more than that – with his life. He just casually nodded and raised his glass.

“Yep.”

That was all he had to say in order for his brothers to understand.

Thomas

Thomas patted his hands together, then stood up straight as he spotted the peacoat-clad figure of his boy-- his *lover*, he reminded himself sternly.

"Hey," Alex called out with a little wave, walking carefully around an icy patch. When he finally reached Thomas, he shook his head. "Jesus, the city must have run out of its salt budget for the year."

Thomas laughed, taking Alex's hand once he was close enough. His cheeks burned, but he stretched up onto tiptoe to give him a hello kiss.

It was quiet and gentle, and full of affection.

"Oh... *hello*," Alex murmured, pulling back after a couple of seconds. "You all right?"

"Never been better," Thomas grinned. "You got all dressed up. I see you chose your pinstriped shirt."

"Yes, sir."

"You always liked pinstripes on your test days. You said it was a lucky charm."

"Oh, man." Alex laughed. "I forgot that. And you look adorable."

Thomas laughed, glowing with appreciation. He'd chosen a chunky gray knitted scarf and a different shade of gray V-neck sweater over a collared shirt.

It seemed like an appropriate outfit to come out in.

"Are your friends and brothers here yet?"

"Yeah, you're the last one."

Alex groaned. "Oh, I hate being the last one."

"Really? You don't like being the center of attention?" Thomas teased. He knew Alex had his moments where he did.

Alex hesitated, then shook his head. "Not when it comes to meeting

important people.”

“It's not a huge deal,” Thomas assured him with a smile.

“They're important to you, so they're important to me. Speaking of which, what have you told them? I don't want you to feel uncomfortable...”

Thomas smiled softly at Alex and leaned in to peck his lips again. “There's rumors is all. I didn't want to assume anything when I told them, but... they know we're seeing each other.”

“Okay,” Alex grinned. “Cool. I'm glad.” He looked much more excited than Thomas had expected.

Thomas smiled back, then led Alex into the bar.

It was noisy that evening and busy, but they'd managed to find their own table big enough to cram a bunch of their buddies in – Floyd, Ryan, Kevin, Ashley, Chase, Noah, Jackson, Cam, and now Thomas and Alex.

Alex actually went pale for a moment, and Thomas grinned. *Oh, my god.* He'd never actually seen Alex visibly nervous before, so the fact that he was now made Thomas's heart squeeze. He was telling the truth about wanting to make a good impression on them.

Thomas loved him all the more.

“Hey, guys. This is Alex.”

“Hi.” Alex waved, looking around at them. “I kinda know a couple of you... I'll try to remember your names.” He slid into one of the two empty chairs they'd all left next to each other and Thomas took the other as they introduced themselves.

Thomas smiled, leaning back to watch.

“Want a beer? Jackson offered. “I'm about to get a round.”

“Oh, thanks,” Alex nodded. “That'd be great.”

A waiter passed by and Jackson flagged him down, then asked for a round of beers.

“So, what do you do?” Ryan asked. “I heard something about being a cop...”

“Oh, no. A private investigator,” Alex chuckled. “Kinda like a cop but we can't carry weapons.”

"Is it dangerous?" Kevin asked.

Alex relaxed, like he'd had this conversation a hundred times. He probably had; Thomas had been just as fascinated when he found out what Alex wanted to become. "Oh, it can be, but it's not as dangerous as the movies make you think."

"Anything happen here?" Ashley asked.

Jackson grinned at Thomas and Thomas just rolled his eyes and laughed.

"What?" Ashley insisted. "I'm just askin'."

"Everyone wants to know about my most dangerous stakeout," Alex grinned. "It's okay. I just can't say much. Client confidentiality. Um, I *can* say that I once had to watch someone all day during a blizzard, building my own snow shelter in the woods to watch from the edge of their property... and then I found bear tracks in the fresh snow."

"Jesus," Thomas muttered. He hadn't heard that one, and all of a sudden he worried a little more for his lover's safety.

Alex grinned and shook his head. "That's rare, though. A lot more of it is just stuff like cheating spouses, lost pets, missing persons."

"Don't the cops deal with missing persons?"

Alex's expression faded into a grimace and he looked around. "Anyone friends with the cops here?"

"Oh, boy." Kevin clapped his hands. "We're getting to the juicy stuff and we haven't even gotten our beers yet."

This set off a round of laughter.

"We work together sometimes," Alex shook his head. "Some are great. Others around here are... well, you saw the headlines. Otherwise, Google them sometime if you want."

Thomas nodded. He read the newspaper, though most of their friends didn't. It was hard to find New Brunswick-specific news otherwise.

"They just can't do everything we can, and vice versa. Sometimes they have bigger things to worry about in a particular time or year. Sometimes people don't trust the cops, but they trust someone outside of them."

Ashley was nodding thoughtfully.

"That's pretty cool," Jackson agreed.



“How did you meet?” Kevin grinned broadly, and a few others – Thomas included – groaned.

“Nosy bastards. You don't have to answer,” Thomas laughed. “But, for the record, we knew each other from school.”

“No kidding. That's a long time.”

Alex smoothly answered, “We dropped out of touch for a while. Then when we both moved back here...” *He tracked down my brother and my other brother's lover and then bumped into me...*

They exchanged grins for a moment, both clearly thinking the same thing.

Jackson chuckled under his breath.

“Cool,” Ryan said simply. “Oh, here's our beers. Cheers!”

They all clinked glasses as best they could, then settled back to drink. It only took minutes before they were involving Alex in conversations, asking about his hobbies and who he knew here.

Thomas relaxed while Jackson shot him a *told-you-so* look.

As bizarre as it was being open about who he was now, nobody had even commented. With two gay brothers already, he had the easiest time of all. Their friends could be assholes sometimes, but only in a friendly way and Alex could handle himself.

Maybe this was gonna work out okay.

Alex

"That was really fun."

That was the third time Alex had told Thomas this since arriving at the nice Italian place just a couple blocks away, but he meant it. In the eyes of all their friends and family, it looked like they were already together, and they'd accepted him.

And then Floyd had caught him in passing to murmur that he didn't need to meet up anymore. Everything was fine now, Floyd had said. It hadn't really been the time to quiz him so Alex had nodded and let it go. That aside, things seemed fine with everyone.

And then Thomas had taken his hand for the walk over. Alex had never thought Thomas would be at this stage. He'd never dared to hope as much.

They just had to say it. Saying it out loud made it formal, and Christ, it made them both vulnerable all over again.

But vulnerability also made them stronger, and Alex saw that now. There was something incredible about entrusting each other with their hearts for the second time, even knowing what had happened last time.

This time, they'd work things out.

"I've got another cheating husband case tomorrow," Alex murmured. "This one should be a lot easier to prove, if she's right."

"Don't you get tired of that?" Thomas asked. "I mean, it must be hard."

Alex bit his lip. "I... actually let it influence what I thought about relationships for a while," he admitted slowly. "And I was really depressed. I'm getting a little better, but it's worse in the winter. So that influences what I think."

Thomas sucked in a slow breath and nodded. "I see."

"I'm getting therapy."

"Oh?" Thomas looked startled. "I'm glad for you."

Alex smiled to himself. "Me, too. I'm... I'm trying," he promised. "I hope I can get a little less... rough around the edges. Maybe a little more hopeful. I talked to my parents not long ago, actually, on that note. It was kind of weird, but nice."

Thomas settled back as they waited for their main courses. "What did they say?"

"Um, that they had to work hard at things." Alex caught his eyes, scooting his chair closer to the table and reaching out a hand.

Thomas silently rested his fingertips so they lightly entwined with Alex's. He nodded again.

"Just that they were already similar enough that things worked out, but then all the minor differences, they had to work through... nothing we haven't heard before."

"Yeah. Jackson's really big on that, too."

"He's big on a lot of things."

Thomas laughed, making Alex smile too. "Yeah. He's a bit hotter-tempered."

"I remember that much from school."

"Oh, right. Of course you would."

It was easy to forget that they'd known each other so long. So many more important things had happened over the last couple of weeks.

Their sparkling cordial – non-alcoholic, Alex had insisted, since he had to drive – arrived. They let go of each other's hands.

"I'm ready for something steady," Alex admitted slowly, swirling his glass around like it was wine.

Thomas smiled and nodded. "Me, too. Actually, I wanted to talk to you later, but... no time like the present. You said you were willing to wait..."

"Mmhmm." Alex watched him, trying not to get his hopes up again.

"I've talked to everyone now. My family's cool. I'm cool. I just... I think I'm ready."

Alex raised his eyebrows, his lips slowly curving into a smile. "You want to be my boyfriend?"

Thomas let out a quiet breath and nodded, his eyes locked on Alex's.

"I was just waiting for you to seriously ask."

"Over the summer, I asked," Alex hummed. "What changed?"

Thomas laughed. What *hadn't* changed? "Both of us."

Alex paused, then chuckled and conceded the point with a nod. "Good point. So, boyfriends?"

"To being boyfriends." Thomas picked up his glass to clink with Alex's, and then they sipped.

It wasn't an earth-shattering moment like he'd once expected. It was the quiet whisper of something that had long been out of place slipping into just the right spot in his life.

Alex wasn't leaving; Thomas was ready to admit it to himself and everyone.

"On one condition," Alex smirked after a moment of the words settling in the air.

"Hm?" Thomas narrowed his eyes suspiciously as he smiled.

"You let me teach you to properly ski."

"Oh, no," Thomas groaned theatrically. "I can't afford to break any more gear."

Alex laughed, settling back in his chair. "Are you afraid?"

Thomas looked hesitant. "Maybe a little."

"Fall off the horse ten times, get up eleven."

Thomas snorted, almost choking on his cordial. "I don't know how many horses you've fallen off, but you might have a concussion."

Alex had to cover his mouth before he burst out in impolitely loud laughter in the middle of the formal restaurant.

"If you insist, I suppose," Thomas winked.

Before the winter ended, Alex would drag him back onto the slopes again. Despite Thomas's theatrical reluctance, Alex could see him looking excited about the idea. After all, this time they could cuddle in front of the wood stove afterward.

"Valentine's Day is coming up," Alex winked, leaving the suggestion in the air to see how Thomas felt about it.

Thomas didn't even hesitate for a moment, just nodded firmly.

“Perfect. It's a date.”

Thomas

"We could go to your place."

"No," Alex murmured, catching Thomas's eyes as they made their slow way along the freshly-salted sidewalk to his car. "I'd rather go to yours."

Thomas blinked. He preferred his own place, of course, but why did Alex?

His confusion must have shown on his face. "It... It feels more homey," Alex told him with a sheepish smile.

"Aw, you don't like your apartment?" Thomas frowned, swinging their hands lightly between them. "It's an okay little place, just plain."

"Exactly. Yours looks comfortable."

Thomas laughed. "I can get Noah to help you decorate," he teased. "He'll get your house sorted out. He did all of ours, and we're still tweaking and adding things. Jackson's always making metal art pieces now, too. He got really inspired last year."

Alex grinned. "Cool. But does that offer apply to my new house, if I wind up moving?"

"I thought that was a ruse!" Thomas stared at him. "You *are* getting a mortgage?"

"What, a ploy to investigate? No," Alex laughed. "Not completely, anyway. I've been thinking about moving. I don't want to live in an apartment for more than a couple years."

Thomas hummed quietly and squeezed Alex's hand. "How much do you value living alone right now?"

Alex slowly looked at him. "I'm... not a big fan of it. Why?"

"Well... I know we only just agreed to officially date, but looking forward... what do you think about living with me? Maybe a year or two down the road, maybe a few months?" Oddly, Thomas didn't feel as nervous as he'd expected.

"I'd like that," Alex answered. He didn't even take a moment to think about it, which told Thomas he'd been thinking about it himself. "I... I'm a little jealous of your brothers."

Thomas laughed quietly, leading Alex around a patch of ice before stepping over the snow bank toward his car. "Me, too, sometimes. They're so much further ahead... and always have been."

"Really? God, you've got so much lined up already," Alex told him firmly. Thomas's spirits lifted at the sincere encouragement. "You're a couple years younger than me, and god, I barely have my own shit sorted out."

Thomas laughed. "I think I was an adult from... pretty much high school on. I just always focused on the future."

"As long as we take time to enjoy the present." Alex let go of his hand and circled around to the driver's side while Thomas gazed thoughtfully at him. When Alex saw him watching him, he laughed. "Get in before you think about that."

Thomas obeyed and climbed into the passenger seat, buckling up. He rubbed his hands together and stuck them between his thighs. "That's very wise."

"I meditated on the ski mountain to learn that."

"Really?" The moment he asked, Thomas groaned. "Shut up."

Alex snorted. "You almost believed me."

"Almost. Not quite." Thomas grinned anyway, pressing his hand against Alex's knee and rubbing lightly as Alex pulled away from the curb.

The air in the car warmed up as the engine ran, and by the time they were back at the group of three houses, it was *almost* toasty.

"That's the worst thing about winter," Thomas groaned. "You can park up in the driveway behind me."

Alex looked startled at the sudden complaint, then concerned. "What is?" He pulled up into the driveway.

Thomas smiled. "It's nothing," he quickly reassured him. "Just that the car gets hot right when you get where you're going."

"It's better than being in Toronto where you're stuck in traffic for so long your car gets hot and stuffy." Alex pulled the parking brake, shut off the car, and grinned at him. "Or Montreal, where they swear at

you in French.”

Thomas laughed, climbing out of the car. “I’ve never lived anywhere but here or Halifax, and I don’t really want to. Everyone else seems to have and nobody likes it.”

“That’s not true.” Alex stayed by his side as they walked up to the front door. “There’s Vancouver, all the artsy guys and drama students smoke pot with cops... Alberta, where everyone gets rich and shares STDs, unless the price of oil keeps dropping...”

“Oh my god,” Thomas laughed under his breath as he unlocked his door. “You’re not selling them to me.”

“No?” Alex grinned. “I didn’t mind Toronto, actually. Certain parts.”

“Like where?”

“The gay village. C’mon, that’s pretty cool. Have you visited?”

“Not really,” Thomas smiled. “I went out to see Cam a couple times, but we never went there.”

Alex feigned shock. “He didn’t take you? How lax.”

“He wouldn’t have known I’d be interested,” Thomas grinned. “Besides, you know I don’t do clubs.”

“There’s more than just clubs. There’s cafes and bookshops and nerdy places.”

That didn’t sound half-bad. Thomas nodded. “We can go out there sometime, then.”

Alex hung up his coat and kicked off his boots. “Good. I’ll take you someday.” People would forget him by then. Give them a year or two and he’d get a warm welcome in most bars.

“Thank you for looking out for my cultural education,” Thomas teased, hooking his thumbs through Alex’s belt loops to pull him closer.

Alex winked. “Oh, of course. You’re getting a late start. It’s my duty.”

“Why, ‘cause you’re the first guy I dated?”

Alex went still for a moment, his eyes widening.

Thomas turned red. Now that he thought about it, he’d never told Alex that. He’d hinted that he’d been more experienced than he actually had been back then. “Er, first *real* date. I mean, I kissed other boys



before you..." *And god knows I slept with other men afterward.*

"I was your first-ish...?"

Thomas nodded, letting go of Alex's belt loops and sliding his hands to his hips. They felt perfectly right settled there, his thumbs on Alex's hipbones. He was a bit scrawny; Thomas would have to feed him well.

"And you still want me? Usually people run *screaming* from their first," Alex snorted.

"Not sleep with them years later?" Thomas laughed and sidled closer to press his lips against Alex's. *He's so worried about what I think, too. Did the depression come with a low self-image or something?* He murmured, "You weren't, and aren't, half-bad."

Alex relaxed, an embarrassed little smile crossing his lips. "C-Cool."

Thomas decided he'd spare Alex from more compliments just yet. Considering how egotistic he pretended to be, he really couldn't handle them. "I missed you," Thomas murmured. "Would it be rude if I pulled you right upstairs?"

The embarrassment faded into a pleased grin on Alex's face. "I don't think so. I might be biased, though."

"Excellent." Thomas winked. "Then come upstairs."

Alex slid his arm around Thomas's waist and squished him into his side to walk upstairs side by side. He rubbed Thomas's hip and thigh, then up his side. "I missed you, too. I went to talk to my parents last night."

"Mm?"

"They'll want to meet you sometime, if you're cool with it. And I wouldn't mind meeting yours. I vaguely remember them, but it was a long time ago."

Thomas smiled at the memory of sleepovers with Alex, or studying together. They'd usually gone to Alex's parents' house, but they'd spent a little time at home, too. Alex had just strategically avoided times when the other boys were home. Cam being at hockey all the time, that hadn't been hard.

God, they'd snuck around for so long.

"I wouldn't mind," Thomas admitted. "Your parents were nice. They were always relaxed."

“Wonder if they guessed.”

Thomas shook his head. “You had a lot of friends. Unless you dated them all...” Alex had always been the stud with a bit of a bad boy vibe. Getting his attention at all had been miraculous, even if it had just been to help him with math homework at first.

Thank god it had turned into more.

Alex closed the door this time, then turned Thomas around gently and pressed him up against the back of it.

He had *no idea* how hot that made Thomas. Thomas trembled for a moment before bracing his legs firmly as Alex pressed his leg between them and ground their bodies together slowly. Their lips met as naturally as the horizon met the ocean – gently at first, then harder, with swells of emotion.

Lust wasn't overshadowing stronger sentiment, though. Thomas moaned and grabbed Alex's hips to force his body as close as possible. Trapped between the cool, solid surface of the door and the heat of Alex's body, his body tingled with pleasure.

“You *love* a little manhandling, don't you?” Alex murmured.

Thomas nodded hard. “And you know how to handle me,” he whispered. “You can do a little more, though.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Surprise me.”

Alex's fingers closed around Thomas's wrists, pulling his hands above his head. “I can think of a few ideas... but give me one.”

Thomas's cock hardened between them a little more, the blood rushing south as his eyes widened. Christ, he was into this, whatever it was.

“You can lift me, I bet. You're strong,” Thomas teased.

He didn't have to drop any more hints: Alex let go of his wrists. His sexy lover grabbed his ass and hoisted him into the air.

“Jesus--” Thomas grabbed Alex's shoulders, trying to wrap his legs around his waist. “A *second* of warning!”

“You told me to surprise you.”

“Dick,” Thomas laughed as Alex crashed onto the bed with him. He squirmed under Alex, keeping a firm hold on him to roll him over. He

was on top now, Alex under him.

“Oh,” Alex murmured, his eyes widening. “Well, then.”

Thomas unbuttoned Alex's shirt, kneeling back to admire him. It was a lot easier to get a great look at him from this angle instead of underneath.

God, he was strong. Those abs rippled up into a tight stomach and muscled chest with well-defined pecs. His biceps rippled as he shifted his arms to help Thomas pull the shirtsleeves off. The angles and planes of his body caught against the light, framed by wrinkles in the comforter underneath him. His hair, short though it was, was spiked up against the pillows.

Best of all, Alex's cheeks were pink, his eyes already bright and sparkling with anticipation.

“I'm not behind my brothers in one respect,” Thomas told him. “I picked the sexiest boyfriend.”

Alex laughed in surprise. “Well.” He ran a hand down his own stomach. “You mean the gym time paid off?”

“Definitely,” Thomas winked. He pressed his hand over Alex's cock, a stiff bulge in his dark jeans. “I want to lick those abs.”

Alex groaned, and Thomas felt his cock twitch under his hand. He had to be going half-crazy for more attention.

Thomas winked and pulled his hand away after rubbing the bulge just a couple times. He shrugged his own shirt off, almost tangling his head in it before managing to get it free.

“Need a hand?” Alex smirked.

Thomas tossed his head. “I'm fine.” He braced himself over Alex, kissing at the side of his neck and along his collarbone.

Alex took no time to respond to that, his chest rising and falling quickly. “Oooh. Now who's the tease?”

“Fair's fair.” Thomas intended to take his time. He kissed along Alex's ear and behind it, then along his jaw and under his chin, down his throat...

With each press of warm lips to hot skin, Alex twitched or tensed or moaned very softly. It was incredibly fun, and he hadn't even gotten to the good part.

Thomas kissed slowly down his chest toward one nipple, smirking as Alex's moans went up a pitch when he was an inch or so away from the sensitive flesh. *There's all those nerves...*

"Thomas..." Alex whispered in a hoarse breath.

"Mmhmm?" Thomas kissed a slow circle around the nipple, never straying closer than an inch away. What delicious pecs he had, though. Christ, he was built.

Alex chuckled breathily and didn't say anything yet, but when Thomas glanced up, his eyes were dark with hunger.

Thomas took mercy and licked slowly up the curve of his chest, then over his nipple.

"Ah..." Alex's head fell back and he pressed his feet into the bed, his fingers curling hard into Thomas's shoulders.

Christ, he had a strong grip.

Thomas flicked his tongue across the stiff nipple a few times. Another groan, this one harsher, escaped Alex's throat and Thomas's lips curved in a wondrous smile. He wondered just how much of Alex's body was as sensitive as he remembered.

Thomas flicked his lips around a nipple, then sucked it into his mouth and ran his tongue around it again.

"Oh, your mouth's even better than I remember," Alex breathed out. His grip had relaxed slightly as he kneaded Thomas's shoulders.

Thomas licked all the way over to his other nipple and sucked harder, pinching the nub between his lips and flicking his tongue harder.

Alex arched off the bed. "Ah!"

Thomas soothed the spot with a few kisses and a wink, then scooted backward a little at a time, kissing the whole way down. He took particular time kissing each of those ridiculous abs. He mouthed at the sensitive skin, sucking until Alex was twitching and moaning.

Alex was nearly a mess, but he had one more thing to do first.

Thomas fumbled with his jeans to pull them open and down and Alex arched his hips gladly to help him get his clothes off. Thomas yanked his own jeans off with less care. When Alex was ready to take over, he wanted to be ready.

Alex's cock bobbed free, stiff and pink above his stomach. It was a

point of pride that *he* was fully responsible for teasing it to this state, and he wanted to please Alex a little more.

Alex hardly seemed sure what to do with his hands – he kept touching Thomas's shoulders, upper arms, and hair lightly. He shifted a few times, trying to get a comfortable position. "I-I'm tested, I'm all good. If you were thinkin' about that."

*He's... not used to letting someone else take over.* Thomas shot a perceptive little glance up to Alex's face and smiled. "Okay. Me, too."

"For everything?"

Thomas nodded. "So, you know, when you get bored of this... if you want to forgo condoms..."

Alex's eyes widened at the implication. He almost sat up, but he shifted again, his thighs spreading a little more. "Cool. Yeah. I'd love to. I mean, we're boyfriends..."

"Just relax," Thomas whispered and kissed along his thigh toward his stomach. Then, he kissed the base of Alex's cock, lapping his balls for a few moments before working his way up the shaft.

"Nnnh." Alex seemed to be struggling to lie back, but he finally let out a deep breath and did so, his eyes half-closing.

"Mm," Thomas moaned his approval, then closed his lips around the head to suck gently on that sensitive part. It was salty, yet tasty; it had been years since he'd last tasted him, but he'd remember the taste of Alex anywhere. God, he loved it.

He bobbed his head slowly, taking the velvety, smooth shaft all the way down. He licked along the veins and the underside the most, keeping his lips carefully between his teeth and the smooth skin.

Then, once he was confident he had the right angle and he wouldn't hurt his lover, he drew his head up and bobbed back down. He set into a quick, wet sucking rhythm.

"Hah! Nnh, Thomas-- yeah," Alex whispered. Despite his relaxation, he was tensing now from arousal. His thighs clenched, his stomach tightened... When Thomas made eye contact, he was squeezing his eyes shut and rolling his head back as his chest heaved for breath.

Thomas paused now and then to lap at the head and the sensitive spot on the underside of that thick cock. He kept stroking the base of Alex's dick with his other hand, keeping it hot and tight for him.

"T-Thom-- you're-- Jesus, I'm gonna come in *minutes*."

Thomas almost snorted with laughter, but his mouth was too full. He just slowly pulled his head up and off the shaft, not even minding that his jaw faintly ached. That would go away in minutes. The expression on Alex's face – strung out from pleasure, slack-jawed, staring at him like a sex god? That would be imprinted on his memory forever.

“Then show me what you've got first,” Thomas whispered, kissing his stomach and chest. He barely got one lick in before Alex grabbed him and hauled him the rest of the way up, rolling them over to pin Thomas down. “Yes...!”

Alex ground against him, his wet cock sliding against Thomas's only slightly moist but very much throbbing hard-on.

Thomas's eyes widened and he gasped. “Oh, Christ.”

“You always liked a little dick-on-dick action,” Alex whispered. His voice dripped with filthy suggestion. “Someday, I'm just gonna hold you down and make you come by grinding against you.” For emphasis, Alex pulled his hands above his head, lacing them with his own fingers. Alex's hips moved in slow, skilled circles to rub the sensitive shafts together.

“Christ, I was in your backseat once,” Thomas complained, though his heart pounded with arousal at the words. “Don't need to do that again.”

Alex laughed loudly and winked. “It's more fun now. See?” For emphasis, he ground hard, Thomas's cock burning at the friction between them. The firm, throbbing shaft against his gave him plenty of sensation that nothing else could compare to.

“Fine,” Thomas whispered. “But not tonight. We need to celebrate.”

“That we do.” Alex let go of Thomas's hands and went for the lubricant without being directed to, helping himself to a generous squirt of it.

Thomas gasped at fingers pressing up in him but pushed his feet into the bed and gritted his teeth with pleasure. And then Alex was rubbing his prostate like the teasing little fucker he was.

Not that Thomas was much better. Thomas had loved teasing Alex with foreplay earlier, and he'd do even more of it next time.

“You're so gorgeous,” Alex whispered. “I hope it doesn't get old that I say that so much.”

Thomas chuckled. “I'll find a way to deal with it,” he teased. “Mmph.”

The teasing fingers only made him crave something a lot bigger and harder. Within a minute, he squirmed and shook his head, his eyes closed as he struggled for breath. His body was sparking and tingling, throbs of pleasure running through him from head to toe. "I'm good. I'm *more* than ready."

"Yeah?" Alex murmured.

The fingers in him slid out, leaving him disappointingly empty. Thomas kept his eyes shut for a few moments to try to catch his breath while Alex finished getting ready.

The moment he felt a hot, hard cock head with a surprising texture rubbing against him, he remembered the offer he'd made. His eyes snapped open again with surprise.

"You all right?" Alex smiled, bracing himself but not pushing in yet. "I can do a condom if you'd rather. It's not a big deal."

"No," Thomas whispered. He wanted to be Alex's in a way that made him burn with embarrassed but wholehearted pleasure. The thought of being claimed from the inside out set his heart racing.

"Okay. You ready, baby?"

Thomas nodded and whispered, "Make love to me."

Alex didn't even look surprised, but his cheeks rounded into a beautiful smile. His white teeth flashed and his eyes glittered. The joy on his face was indescribable, and Thomas committed it to memory, too.

He hoped he remembered this day for years to come.

Then, the slow, hot slide inside him as fullness burst through him, followed by fiery pleasure. "Hnnh!" Thomas groaned, grabbing Alex's hips and digging his nails in to haul him in.

"Yeah," Alex moaned, his cock sliding in without resistance. He filled Thomas perfectly, though it was a tight fit. It was just perfect for them both. "You're..." Alex trailed off, shaking his head as he gazed at Thomas. Alex was fully seated now, his cock utterly filling him while Thomas squirmed underneath.

Thomas couldn't even catch his breath as he shifted his feet around and rolled his head back. "Hnnh. Yeah...? I'm what?" he whimpered. "Oh, Jesus." He needed that cock surging in and out with the power of Alex's hips.

What the fuck was he waiting for? Oh, this was almost perfect...!

"I love you." Alex's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard, his eyes locking with Thomas's. "I'm sorry if this is fast--"

Thomas let out his breath and whispered, "I love you too, of course, you idiot. I never stopped." He cleared his throat and grabbed Alex's face to haul him down for a quick, sloppy kiss. "Now get moving before I die of blue balls," Thomas moaned his exasperation.

The laugh against his lips from Alex's surprise sounded gorgeous echoing around the walls of his bedroom. Thomas grinned, then relaxed as his tension was finally satisfied.

Alex fucked him tenderly and slowly, his cock pushing in and pulling out at an incredible, deep, slow pace. He was so patient, and it made Thomas's heart flutter in ways even he would never admit.

"Yeah..." Thomas moaned, sucking Alex's lip between his own as their eyes shut. Their noses bumped and they panted against each other's lips now and then.

The cold of the car and the outside air was long forgotten now. Alex kept smiling, and Thomas even thought sometimes it might be unconscious. He didn't even seem to realize he was doing it.

Ecstasy wasn't far away as the bed creaked and Alex's gasps turned from soft to loud, voiceless to moaned. Thomas wasn't shy about groaning his pleasure and approval when Alex found just the right angle.

When Alex sped up, it was by mutual agreement. "Yes!" Thomas groaned, slapping Alex's ass lightly. He loved feeling those muscles clenching under his hands with the effort Alex put into it, even if he made it seem like nothing.

Alex kissed him until he lost all rational thought, and then a little longer. Alex's hand pinning down both his wrists until Thomas's hands curled into fists with the desire to stroke his own cock was almost the last straw.

Alex's hot, tight hand around his cock, jerking him off at the same hard, twisting pace he so loved was the last straw.

Thomas spilled over the edge all at once, groaning and arching off the bed, clutching at Alex's shoulders and clenching hard around him. "Yes! Yes, Alex... don't stop..." He threw his head back as his passion spilled from deep within between their friction-hot bodies. "Alex!"

"Yes, baby," Alex moaned against his cheek and jaw, then bit his neck. "I'm-- yeah! Thomas, d'you want me--"



Thomas's eyes flew open to see that beautiful face clenching in ecstasy. "Yes," Thomas hissed, tightening his grip so Alex couldn't pull out of him.

Alex's cheeks flushed with pleasure and amazement, and then he came. His warm joy flooded them both, and Thomas's chest and cheeks burned at the utterly new feeling.

"Yes," Alex moaned, kissing near his ear as he tried to catch his breath and pound into Thomas a couple last times. "Oh, god..."

Thomas tightened his arms around Alex's back, hugging him close as both their bodies went still, save for their heaving chests.

He never, *ever* wanted to let this man go again.

Alex pulled out but not away, rubbing his hand over Thomas's forehead to brush his hair back and affectionately kiss him again.

Thomas moaned, then gave Alex a loopy little grin. "Perfect."

"Just what you ordered, hm?"

Thomas nodded, almost too exhausted to even answer. As his breath returned, so did all other thought. Though he'd braced himself for bittersweet emotions, none came; there was no regret now in Thomas's heart.

"That was... incredible," Alex whispered. The way he watched Thomas told Thomas that he felt it, too. Something subtle was happening now – maybe some post-sex hormone making them feel closer. Whatever the case, he couldn't stop watching Alex, either.

Thomas murmured, "We can do that again. Lots of times."

Alex chuckled deeply, the sound reverberating through both of their bodies. "Especially when we don't see each other for a day. Jesus."

"I can't help what you do to me," Thomas grinned. Alex made him prickle with pleasure to look at, even when he'd already finished. Come to think of it, round two wasn't off the table.

"How about if we did this all the time? My lease is up in a couple months, and I... well..."

"Move in," Thomas whispered his invitation, his eyes widening hopefully. Christ, the only better thing he could imagine than dating and loving this man was getting to live with him, too.

Alex grinned. "I can't say no to that face. I'd love to."

Thomas kissed his lips until Alex laughed and rolled his head away for breath, then kissed his cheek a few more times. "Perfect. When's your lease up?"

"March."

"That's *two months* away," Thomas complained.

"I'll spend enough time over here," Alex chuckled again. "Besides, we have work to keep us busy. And we can plan which side of the bed we'll sleep on..."

"Dibs on this side," Thomas told him. "You better like the other."

Alex snorted and turned his face away to laugh again, then pecked his lips. "I love you," he reiterated simply.

"Love you, too." Thomas rolled carefully onto his side, caressing Alex's cheek and hair. "Speaking of work... I never told you. I reported it, and some sleazy manager offered me a promotion. I'm assuming to stay quiet."

Alex nodded. "Did you take it?" he asked carefully.

"Fuck, no. I really wanted it – you know how much I wanted it... but no. Then my actual boss, the head honcho here in the branch, caught me in the hall and said she might be hiring next week. I think... she's gonna offer me the job again."

"Would you say yes this time?"

Thomas nodded. He'd had a little time to think about it, and the more he did, the more he liked the idea. "If it comes from her, it's not a bribe. It means she believes in me. And I can do so much good. I can help people out in weird situations. You know, single parents or gay couples or groups of friends... people lenders usually don't like."

Alex nodded thoughtfully. "Making good out of a bad situation."

Thomas hadn't thought of it that way, but he nodded. "I think so, yeah. I've always wanted to do this. To be more than on the front lines. It would be... more fulfilling."

"I'm sort of doing the same thing. I'm dropping a lot of companies and working on personal cases," Alex murmured. He carded his fingers through the light hair on Thomas's chest. "I can afford to now."

"As long as you don't have to become a honey trap again," Thomas murmured with a faint frown of concern. "I'm not judging what work you take."

Alex shook his head. “No, I know. It's not about that. It's honestly... something I need to do for me. I need more faith in people.”

“And investigating cheating assholes will do that?” Thomas laughed.

Alex nodded thoughtfully. “Cause it's not them I'm doing it for, it's the loyal people on the other end of it who got hurt. I want to help them get the strength to walk away.”

The words hung between them for a few moments. Thomas smiled slowly and touched Alex's cheek, then kissed him again. He wouldn't compliment him on being noble because Alex would just turn that compliment down, but he believed it.

Alex had a damn good heart, and Thomas was lucky he'd given it to him.

It had been a challenge, and he knew now that sometimes the biggest challenges didn't come from outside forces. The obstacles Thomas had built up were all in his head, but challenging them was a thousand times harder than standing up to peer pressure from some other person. He didn't give a crap about other people, but facing his own desires was the hardest thing he'd done.

Thank god Alex had stuck around for him. This time, Alex had understood what was wrong and how to help him. And Thomas could see it on Alex's face: Alex was happier now. Maybe not cured yet, not the best man he could be, but he was getting there.

This second time around, they were trusting each other with more than just their hearts. There was a whole life together to look forward to. Sure, it would be messy and complicated sometimes, but it was worth fighting for that future together.

## Epilogue

Four months later...

“Here's to the first year!”

Bottles clinked all around in a cacophony of glass as the Riley brothers, their family, and their friends celebrated.

“And,” Jackson continued, still standing at one of the picnic tables in their shared backyard, “to us. Me and Chase, Cam and Noah, and our newest couple...”

A chorus of “Awww”s, predictably enough, sounded from everyone as all eyes turned to Thomas and Alex.

Thomas turned beet-red and even Alex blushed under the scrutiny, but they held up their bottles in answer.

Since moving in a couple months back, the last vestiges of tensions between Alex and the other brothers and boyfriends had vanished. That night with Chase's family had done wonders to ease the tensions.

It helped that Alex was doing better these days – brighter and happier, getting out of bed easier. He attributed it to therapy, more sunshine, but most of all, Thomas.

Their love was clear in the way they watched each other.

“Now kiss!” Kevin shouted while Ryan groaned and Jackson laughed.

Thomas looked like he wanted to melt into the ground, but he leaned in and pecked Alex's lips before swigging from his beer bottle again.

“Oh, that was boring,” Noah groaned.

“If you wanna show us how it's done...” Alex shot back with a grin, his arm around Thomas's shoulders.

Noah grabbed Cam and bent him backward – even though they were seated side-by-side at the picnic table – for a kiss.

Cam nearly spilled his beer, flailing to grab Noah for balance as Noah kissed him deeply.

Even their parents were laughing at Cam being utterly caught off-guard, his eyes comically huge. Floyd, unlucky enough to share the

bench with them, leaned back as far as he could from them and pulled a face while Chase laughed loudly.

Then, Chase stood up beside Jackson and pecked his lips sweetly – a lot less shyly than Thomas had, but not as blatant as Noah. “To all of us,” he toasted, pulling Jackson to sit back down again.

Everyone toasted that and drank again.

“And,” Cam added, not even bothering standing up, “to Kevin. We’re seeing him off in just a couple days.”

“Aw, no,” Kevin waved his hand. “I don’t do goodbye parties.”

“To the best *damn* hockey player I know,” Cam insisted, leaning over to punch his shoulder. “Coach Walker’s gonna have a field day with you unless you practice your crossovers harder.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Kevin groaned to laughter. Cam hadn’t even acted a bit jealous since hearing that Kevin was due to head to training camp to fill the very same spot he once held.

Instead, he’d pumped Kevin full of advice, even taking him for some one-on-one exercises at the town court. Now that he could exercise again, he’d taken full advantage of that fact.

The Rileys’ parents stood up next, Mrs. Riley urging Mr. Riley to say something.

“Your mother and I just wanted to say,” he addressed them as they all went quiet and looked at him, listening closely. “We’re very proud of you and glad to have you here. Most of all, we’re happy to see you happy. May you be happy for a long time to come.”

The “Aww”s were mixed with applause and cheering as he sat down again.

“All right, enough. More burgers!” Jackson told them, wrestling himself free of the picnic table bench to head back to the barbecue. “And more beer.”

The sun shone down on them, the grass whispered in the wind, and uplifted, joyful voices floated beyond the fences around their shared backyard.

For the moment, everything was just right.

Crunch

THE RILEY BROTHERS BOOK 4

E. DAVIES

## Prologue

Greyson

Floyd's hands were just as skilled at pulling clothes off as drawing precise ink lines across Greyson's skin.

It was impossible not to watch him, like he was addicted to him. Greyson moaned as he pulled Floyd through his apartment door.

“Jesus.”

He could barely keep himself upright, stumbling over shoes in the darkness.

Floyd's arms were there, though, circling around him and guiding him inside. Once their shoes were off, Floyd grabbed Greyson's hips and hauled their bodies together.

*Yes!* Greyson's body burned with need as he moaned. He tried not to think about the dozens – no, hundreds of hours spent in easy silence, side-by-side in a patrol car. That felt like almost a lifetime ago.

They couldn't be around each other for more than five seconds without sexual tension now.

“Which way's your room?” Greyson pressed several more kisses against Floyd's full, tempting lips, then gasped as Floyd grabbed his ass and squeezed.

He wanted Floyd's skilled hands all *over* his body, not just inking tattoo lines on his skin.

“That way.”

They were in the bedroom within moments and Greyson needed to show Floyd how fucking hot he was for him, too. He shoved Floyd up against the door, grinding against him in quick thrusts as they yanked properly at each other's shirts now to get them both naked.

God, what a sight. Floyd was fucking *hot* now with his arms and chest covered in bright, cleanly-inked tattoos – but Greyson had put on weight and muscle since they'd become rookie cops together.

Floyd's hips ground in a slow, promising circle against his own, both their cocks rubbing through fabric. Better yet, Floyd's open lips

pressed sucking kisses against Greyson's neck until Greyson's knees went weak.

“Oh, fuck. You'd better not be a tease.” Greyson was burning from head to toe now as he dug his nails into Floyd's sides. Considering Greyson had Floyd pinned, Floyd was not the underdog right now.

“I'm not. Cause I follow through.”

Greyson's cock throbbed again, and a shiver of desire ran straight down his spine. The confident words were the hottest thing he'd heard in weeks, maybe months.

Floyd had Greyson wrapped around his finger.



Floyd

“Any interesting clients this week?”

Floyd grinned as he leaned back, trying to keep his head straight. “Well, there was one who wants a snake tattoo fixed up. It looked really shitty – I think a buddy of his did it originally. So we’ve been going over how to fix it, and I think I can cover most of the shittiness up.”

“Oh, good.” His hairdresser, Christian, teased tufts of hair away to clip one at a time, working his way rapidly around the crown of his head. As he worked, his forearms flexed, a muscle on his inner arm easily visible in the mirror. There were birds tattooed across it – birds Floyd had worked on last year. They weren’t fading, either. Good. Christian was taking proper care of them.

“Mm. Other than that, not a lot,” Floyd shrugged. “Business has been a little slow for me lately, but Chase’s style is really in vogue right now. He’s getting a lot of work.”

“Mmm. That must be tricky,” Christian murmured. “We see cuts go into and out of style all the time, but it’s easy to learn them. Well, some are a real bitch to do, and some mesh with our style better... but it’s not the same as an art style, I don’t think.”

“Yeah.” Floyd resisted the urge to nod. “Though we do learn other styles. I can do a lot, I just do *best* with my own style.”

“That’s not too dissimilar. Every hairdresser has his own preferences.”

“D’you like doing my cut?” Floyd winked in the mirror, making brief eye contact.

Christian grinned, then nodded. “It’s not far off my boyfriend’s.” He returned his attention to the back of Floyd’s head as Floyd winced.

Of course he had a boyfriend already. “Weren’t you single last time I came in?” *It was kind of the reason I came back to him... well, I did need a new cut, but still.*

“Yeah, we met last week,” Christian smiled. “We were talking online for a while and then we just met and clicked... He’s a student in the

art school here.” He glowed in that annoying little way of new lovers, but Floyd couldn't resent him.

“That's sweet,” Floyd answered. “God, I think everyone but me is paired off.”

“Oh, not at *all*, darling,” Christian grinned. “I hear everything in the chair, believe me. There's a lot of guys out there... looking for their soulmate.”

“You're a love therapist, too?”

“You know it,” Christian laughed. “Do you want it styled as usual?”

“Yes, please.”

“I'll keep an eye out for someone for you, if you'd like,” Christian winked as he added a bit of gel and hairspray, then showed him the back with a mirror like usual. Then, they stood up.

Floyd laughed. “Thanks.” He dug a bill out of his pocket and handed it over. As usual, he tipped the change even though it was a cheap haircut. He liked the job Christian did, and he came back every month to have it touched up. “Don't worry about it. See you soon. Oh, can I make an appointment for around the first of June?”

“Of course. Big date?” Christian teased. “Ooh, let me guess, a wedding?”

“Not yet, but...” Floyd trailed off. The rate the Rileys were going... “No, a high school reunion.”

“Exciting!” Christian typed into the computer. “The first works for me. Morning or afternoon?”

“Morning, please.” He took the appointment card when Christian handed it over, then grinned. “Thanks. See you!”

As Floyd strolled out of the shop, his mind wandered. This reunion was going to be miserable without a boyfriend... or at the very least, a date. He could probably rope someone into going, but he was ten years out of high school. Even Thomas was something like a decade younger, yet *he* had a boyfriend.

He knew he shouldn't be worrying about that compared to everything else, but it still grated on his nerves. Maybe he ought to get serious about getting a date... or more. He only had a little more than a month before the reunion, after all.

“And it wouldn't be bad,” he murmured as he started up the car.

Well, hopefully.

## Greyson

"How's the day looking so far?" Greyson sat on the YMCA desk, his knees apart and hands braced behind himself.

"Pretty quiet," Alan told him. He was pretty, with blond hair and blue eyes. Classic beauty, but sometimes they didn't get enough appreciation. And Greyson was pretty sure he was only straight-acting. "Only a few people have booked the group class."

"Mmm." Greyson noticed the way Alan's gaze wandered down his sculpted biceps and toned forearms. He was more than used to people looking him over, and he was pretty damn sure this was a gay look rather than a look of admiration. "Quiet days are nice sometimes."

"Yeah. Less of a crowd in the gym. I might be able to sneak in a workout on my break," Alan grinned.

Greyson winked. "Let me know if you want a spotter."

A little smile flickered across Alan's lips. "Sure." They made eye contact for a few moments. Greyson pushed himself off the desk and Alan's eyes wandered down his body to his arms, watching them flex as Greyson pushed himself upright.

Alan's eyes flickered down to the raised white lines on the insides of his arms. Greyson nearly flinched but held firm.

Alan's eyes were back on his face, his smile a little more forced. "See you, then."

"See you around."

Greyson's jaw gritted as he strode off in that familiar measured pace, his hands instinctively going to tuck his thumbs into a utility belt that was no longer there. Without it, he didn't know where his confidence had gone, but it was shot.

Fuck. And his arms...

It was time to get this sorted once and for all. He'd been saving up for tattoos for *years*, and his skin had to be ready now.

At least he could find out whether it was or not.

He was gonna drop into the local tattoo shop. Yeah, it would be stupidly expensive, but it was also stupidly embarrassing. He'd always been better at hiding his insecurities than most, but it was damn near impossible to work out properly in a long-sleeved shirt.

And his arm hair *almost* covered the marks. Not enough, but almost.

Greyson grimaced and headed into the staff room to grab his water bottle and towel. Time to get ready for class.

Floyd

"Oh, fuck, you're right. You were only a grade ahead of me, so my reunion's next year." Jackson leaned back in his chair with a groan. His boyfriend, Chase, laughed nearby at the dismayed expression he wore. "I suppose I have to go, since I'm living here..."

"Probably," Floyd laughed. "That's why I'm going, really. Otherwise I wouldn't bother."

"I wonder if anyone's traveling in."

"The popular kids would," Floyd snorted.

Jackson scoffed. "Yeah, like whatshisface, the soccer guy--"

"Ashton!" Floyd grimaced. What a dick. He'd always been a dick.

"Yeeeah. And the prom queens."

Floyd laughed. "Anyway, I'll probably be the sad, single gay guy there..."

"Not sad," Chase snorted. "You own your own fuckin' business. Most of them are probably stuck in unpaid internships."

Jackson winced as they all laughed. "Oooh, ouch."

"We could set you up with... someone..." Chase trailed off, looking at Jackson thoughtfully.

"Nah." Floyd couldn't think of anyone they knew that he didn't already know – their friendship circle was large but still tight-knit. They'd all gotten together for drinks just a few nights ago before one of his closest buddies from their group, Kevin, had moved. He'd left for Toronto to pursue his hockey career, and Floyd was missing the rough-and-tough, loyal, determinedly cheerful man.

At least Chase was still around, and though Chase was technically his employee at the tattoo shop, they were good friends. Which was why Chase was grinning at him. "Why not? Are you too shy?" he teased.

Floyd groaned and rolled his head back, refusing to let them embarrass him. "No."

“Do you prefer being single?” Jackson asked.

Floyd had to think about it for a few moments. That was a clever question, but difficult. Overall, though... “No. I'm not against dating.”

“Well, if you'd prefer the hollow sentiments, let me know,” Chase smiled.

Floyd chuckled. “I just see you guys all with your boyfriends...” he waved at Chase and Jackson, but he also meant Jackson's brothers. Jackson and his two brothers, Cam and Thomas, had bought three houses together, and within the first year of living there, they'd all found boyfriends who had moved in. The six of them seemed really happy now, and... it was easy to be jealous.

“My family's starting to lean on me,” Floyd admitted. It was kind of a complicated story, but he could at least tell them that much. “Which is fuckin' ironic. They didn't want me around a few years ago, but now...” he trailed off, then cleared his throat.

Instantly, Floyd had a moment of guilt. He didn't talk shit about his family. The Rileys never did, so why should he? That just looked bad, and it wasn't who he wanted to be. The other two were silent, watching him with concerned expressions.

“Anyway, now that everything's going well for me, they want me settling down and stuff,” Floyd concluded simply.

“You're worth being around in the good times and the bad,” Chase told him softly. Jackson hummed his agreement, and Floyd's cheeks heated up.

“Thanks,” Floyd brushed them off with a laugh. “I suppose I could do online dating.”

Chase barely bit back a laugh, but then Jackson chuckled heartily.

Floyd felt like he was missing something. “What?”

“Nothing,” Chase smirked. “Just... that's how we bonded.”

“You didn't meet online!”

“No,” Jackson laughed. “We were buddies, until I asked him for help with my dating profile...” His eyes gleamed mischievously. “So, who would you ask for help?”

“I don't – I don't have anyone in mind,” Floyd laughed. “Maybe I'll just take a fake date.”

“Ohhh. Oh man, that'd be fun,” Jackson laughed. “If I didn't have a real date to take, I would.”

“I was about to say--” Chase threatened, grabbing Jackson's collar playfully to draw him in while Jackson yielded.

Floyd laughed louder. “I'd have taken Kevin if he weren't fuckin' in Toronto now.”

“I know, what a loser,” Jackson sighed. “Cam's been moping around for days.”

“Aww.” Floyd rose to his feet to bring the dishes to the sink, but Chase interrupted to gather the dishes instead. “Okay, I should get to bed, guys. I'll have you over next time. I'm opening in the morning.”

“Good luck. Think Kassie will remember the alarm?” Chase smirked.

“Fuckin' hope so,” Floyd grumbled. He rubbed his face, then reached out to half-hug both his friends. “Thanks, guys.”

“No problem. Let us know if we can help,” Jackson said seriously while Chase nodded.

Floyd clapped Jackson's arm. “Thanks, man.”

As he stepped into the warm street, he tucked his hands into his pockets for the short amble home. He only lived about a twenty-minute walk away, just on the other side of the downtown core, so he didn't mind it. In the summer months, it was actually enjoyable to get some fresh air on a warm evening. It was just winter that sucked here.

As he walked, he took his phone out of his pocket to flick through his messages and notifications. One of them was a badge on the Grindr icon.

*Might as well have a look.*

Floyd checked it, then snorted. Another message from an anonymous profile. He barely even glanced at it before discarding the idea, browsing through nearby matches instead.

“Oof,” Floyd murmured. There *was* one new profile, but he didn't have a photo up yet. His stats were filled in, though – same age as him, similar kind of build. Without a photo, it was hard to know if there was much chemistry, or worse yet, if he already knew the guy.

He closed the app and pocketed his phone again, stretching as he wandered home through the evening. There were much less shady places to find an emergency date if it came to it later, anyway.



Still, walking home alone, away from the little group of houses holding his happily partnered friends, made Floyd's chest ache.

## Greyson

“Police are reporting a break-and-enter on the north side last night. A home on Main Street was broken into at around three AM last night. Police are advising citizens to keep their doors locked while investigations are ongoing.”

Greyson's eyes narrowed as he pushed his hair back off his forehead. A break-and-enter? That wasn't very common here. They had the odd ones, sure, but usually it was people leaving their doors unlocked.

He still couldn't break the habit of morning radio. He ran around the neighborhood early every day, usually well before the sun was up in the winter. This time of year the sun was up, but few others were, so it was his favorite time to go for a run.

Gravel crunched under his feet as he turned onto the next street, enjoying having the sidewalk all to himself. There were a few dangerous spots without crosswalks where cars could suddenly turn, but he tried to avoid those when mapping out his routes.

He could always switch to the police scanner.

No, he told himself firmly. He had to break this habit. He wasn't going to get hired again – not after what had happened before. Not after Alberta, that was for damn sure.

Greyson slowed his pace as he switched his phone to playing music instead, settling into his usual morning jog playlist. Around the edges of his neighborhood, past the park, then through downtown, over the walking bridge and back to his own house. It took him a good forty minutes to an hour depending on how fit he felt each morning and how many times he stopped.

This routine was most important to him because of the endorphins. He needed that in the morning – it was the worst time for him, and the only thing that helped was an instant burst of happy hormones in his body.

Plus, he still woke up at stupidly early hours after nearly a decade of police work and irregular hours. The only thing to do at five AM was take up some useless hobby and start quilting or something. Browsing

dating apps was out – nobody wanted a loser who was still awake at that hour, or someone so desperate to be discreet that he only signed in at that time.

He pivoted to avoid a pothole just in time, then let out a breath of relief. That would have been a nasty ankle twist. Fucking city was too broke to fix them, though.

Greyson wiped the sweat from his face as he took a moment at the red light, then crossed for the walking bridge. There were a few people out walking their dogs – two of them on the whole length of the bridge. He nodded to them and they both nodded back.

“And done,” he breathed out as he reached the far end of the bridge, letting himself take a minute to turn around and start slowly walking back for a breather. God, the sun coming up over the river was beautiful some mornings. The trees were filling in, flush with leaves and tiny flowers. The dew on the grass was even romantic.

That was the other thing he missed – despite the hellish hours and the ugly sights sometimes, there were also moments of tranquility just sitting in the squad car watching the sun rise. Sometimes with his partner, sometimes alone.

He missed having a partner.

Greyson set off into another, quicker pace. He was going to push himself the whole way home.

---

“Hey, Darren, over here.”

Greyson waved over his buddies – Darren and Lyle, his favorite guys from the department. They were still here even years later, both having worked their way up in seniority while he was off in Alberta.

Since coming back two months ago, he'd tried to hang out with them over breakfast every couple weeks. He just wanted to check in with them and get familiar with their lives again. So much had changed. They'd been mysteriously busy this week, though. They hadn't been texting back a lot.

“Hey,” Lyle greeted, sliding in opposite him and nodding to the diner waitress for their usual. “How's it going?”

“Can't complain,” Greyson answered, locking his fingers over his chest as he leaned back in the booth, his elbows out. “You two?”

“Good,” they both answered automatically.

Greyson eyed them. “What happened?”

Darren seemed to hesitate, looking at Lyle first.

“Guys,” Greyson said flat-out. “It’s too early to bullshit me. What did you hear?”

“I... would rather hear it from you,” Lyle said cautiously, shifting in his seat. His uniform stretched tight as he leaned back.

They all looked up and nodded in thanks to the waitress for pouring them coffee, then waited until she was out of earshot before exchanging looks again.

Greyson bit his lip hard, then nodded. “Okay.” *I knew it was gonna come out sometime.* “We had this... domestic dispute. I was supposed to bring them both in. The department was getting stupid about that, about not knowing who was “really” at fault, even if that’s bullshit.”

They both nodded.

“I refused. It was... a gay couple.”

Lyle started to look wary as he nodded. Between them hung the heavy memories, but none of them were touching *that*. They all remembered that night. Greyson had learned about Brett hitting Floyd, and he’d... taken matters into his own hands.

“One of them was pushing the other one around a lot. We’d gotten called twice before about them. The other one finally fought back. I wasn’t gonna get him in shit for it. My supervisor disagreed and I... stood my ground.”

“Ah.” Darren nodded. “So they wanted you out?”

“Yeah. I quit, they fired me, whatever. Details. I wasn’t welcome anymore,” Greyson told them simply.

“That’s... not all we heard.”

Greyson’s eyebrows rose with irritation and confusion. “What? What else is going around?”

“Nothin--” Lyle started, but Greyson leaned forward and frowned at him. “Fine. There’s other... gayer rumors.”

They couldn’t know. Greyson hadn’t come out to anyone here. Then again, he wasn’t *hiding*. He just hadn’t figured himself out until he’d moved to Alberta. And he sure as fuck didn’t care what people here

thought about it. "So? They not hiring gay cops these days? Is that back in fashion?" It came out a little more aggressively than he'd meant to.

Darren flinched. "No. Just... they're not a fan of workplace relationships."

Greyson reeled. *What kind of relationships?* That really *was* bullshit. He hadn't gotten involved with anyone even remotely connected to the department for exactly that reason. "I don't know. Those are rumors."

Lyle hummed and blew on his coffee. "Either way, they're as good as fact now. If you wanna get back in--"

"I don't."

--you'll have to work harder."

Greyson's jaw twitched in irritation, but he clamped down on that sign of emotion and took a deep breath instead. Maybe people thought he'd been sleeping with one of those guys, or his supervisor, or the chief – who knew? Didn't make a difference.

Floyd... well, he'd heard enough after Floyd left to convince him he didn't want to be the gay cop. And there was only so much he'd been able to do to shut people up, especially from a precarious position like his.

"Right. Thanks for the heads-up," he finally settled on. "But fuck them all."

"Yeah," Darren nodded. "If you are... you know we're cool with it."

Greyson knew that. That was why he hung out with these two still. He offered a smile and quick nod. "Yeah. Thanks."

"But look out for yourself," Lyle added. "It's a lot friendlier here these days, but there's still assholes. You know, like..."

He didn't have to say it. Greyson's fists remembered him.

"Yeah."

Their breakfast came and it broke the mood, letting them change the subject to better things: the B&E, a few bullshit calls lately, a house fire.

Afterward, he walked with Darren and Lyle back to their cruiser while they decided on a hockey game to go watch at the sports bar in a week or two. When they picked a game, Greyson memorized that

date.

He didn't have a lot of friends right now, so he had to keep up with the few he had.

Greyson was surprised when Darren leaned in for a hand-clasping, back-patting quick hug, and then Lyle. *Fuck, did they see something?* He pulled down his sleeves once he leaned back again. He stretched out a lot of his shirts that way, but it was an unconscious habit more than anything.

“See you guys around. Be safe.”

“You, too.”

He watched them drive off, his heart heavy. He missed the force for the camaraderie more than anything. The department was a tight-knit family once you were in, and... well, that wasn't always a good thing.

Not remotely.

Greyson shivered, then redirected his thoughts to the new class as he climbed into his car for the drive home. He had to plan the next few weeks.

Floyd

"Welcome," Floyd greeted as the shop door rattled closed behind an average-build guy, three tattoos visible on his arms, maybe one on his leg. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Chase's portfolio. I heard he works here?"

"Yeah, he does." Floyd was already rummaging for Chase's portfolio book. "Have you seen his work online?"

"Yeah."

"He has a few extra photos in here. Have you worked with him before?"

"Nope." The guy approached the counter. "Yeah, that's the guy. I saw those ones online."

Floyd flipped to the other photos – the stuff Chase couldn't post online. Just in case it got tracked back to him, and *other people* found him. He knew the truth now: that Chase's family was shitty and he'd moved here to get away from them, taking on almost a new identity. They'd found him, so now Chase was a little less fast and loose showing off his old work under his old name.

He'd worked hard over the last year to build up his new portfolio, and Floyd was damn proud of him.

"This is kind of like what I want." The guy pointed out a tattoo of a sailing boat. "That style for sure, and a yacht like this. That's what caught my eye."

"Oh, his style is perfect for that," Floyd nodded. "All right, sounds great. You wanna come in for a consultation?"

"Yeah, please. When's he in?"

"If you wanna come in at noon, he'll be around," Floyd told him. "He'll need some time to design for you since we do everything custom."

"That's fine."

“Okay, can I take your name?”

Floyd's mind wandered as he typed the appointment into the computer, taking down the new customer's details. Chase had been keeping busy over the last few months in particular, now that his portfolio was larger. Word of mouth was spreading and he was getting better business, not just more of it.

He'd come a long way since Floyd took the massive risk of hiring him with a portfolio he couldn't even show the public. The moment Floyd understood why that was, he'd been determined to keep Chase around until he could rebuild his career. He just hoped he wouldn't take off for bigger and better things now. At least having Jackson here ensured he was rooted in the city.

“All done. See you then,” Floyd told the customer, Ricky.

Now to try to get himself some damn work.

---

Floyd didn't have to worry for long. Chase showed up just before noon, and by the time Floyd finished filling him in on the morning and on his customer, Ricky was back for his consultation.

While they talked in the back room, Floyd manned the front and sold some body jewelry. He had to kick out a teen who was obviously trying to get up the courage to ask for a tattoo without being ID'd, though.

Then the phone rang, and Floyd automatically answered. “Hello, Floyd here.”

“Hi, I was wondering whether you take appointments.”

“We do, and also walk-ins for consultations. We do custom designs only so we rarely do walk-in same-day tattoos, though. Did you want to talk to someone?”

There was a brief pause. “Ah, yeah... yes, I want to talk about some ideas first. See if they're possible.” The voice sounded warm and familiar, but it wasn't the guy who called every now and then wanting something and never having the courage to actually get it done. He'd know *that* voice by now.

“Of course,” Floyd answered. “Today works, come on in.”

“Uh, first, what's your availability for actually doing it?”



“Well...” Floyd hedged. It was a bit of an open-ended question, really. “It depends on the complexity and how long it takes us to draw up the final design, how many hours the design takes... the first appointment in the next week is definitely possible. A sleeve or something will take weeks, a small piece can be done in one session, you know?”

“Right, right.” The caller's voice sounded a little odd, but he cleared his throat. “Okay. Sure. I'll come in at six, if that's okay.”

“What's your name, so I can make an appointment?”

“Peters.”

He'd once known a Peters. Floyd's stomach twisted and he drew a breath. *Not that memory, please.* “Okay, thanks, man. See you at six.”

After he hung up, Floyd rubbed his face. Of all the memories, he sure as hell didn't want to be lost in that one.

## Greyson

Oh man, egg sandwiches were getting old. The protein shake was at least easier to change up by adding different flavors, but Greyson was going to have to find something else for his on-the-go post-workout meal.

Greyson leaned against the desk in the back room as he ate, his mind going over the class. A few slow students today, but they were new. He'd have to adapt their exercises a little next class if they were still having trouble. One of them seemed to have a lot more fun than the other, though.

"How's it goin'?" It was Jake, one of the other instructors. He'd been running a spin class at the same time.

Greyson swallowed and shrugged. "Can't complain. You?"

"Good, good." Jake grabbed his towel and dumped his water bottle off in his locker. "Holy shit, that was a bad class."

Greyson winced in sympathy. "How so?"

"Just... you know... one of those days. Got started late, a few people had trouble, one person nearly fell off her bike..."

Greyson almost choked on his sandwich. "How?"

"She had the seat loosened. I caught it in time, but only just. It wasn't as dramatic as it sounded, but you know. Little things add up."

Greyson punched Jake's arm lightly. "We all got those days."

"Yeah. Coming to the shower?"

"In a sec." Greyson waved the rest of his shake, then tipped his head back to drink it.

"Still loading up on the protein? Don't think you have enough muscles now, big guy?" Jake grinned. "Are you going for a Mike look?"

Mike was the gym rat here. The guy hogged the plates from dawn 'til dusk. He came in at least twice a day and for an hour each time. They were all pretty sure he didn't have a girlfriend or a job.

“Fuck, no.”

Mike was really, grossly fit. Like the kind of over-muscled type that screamed “I only eat steak and eggs for breakfast, lunch, and supper” and made clothes shopping impossible. Worse yet, the kind of muscle that looked great but couldn't lift a handcuffed suspect and haul him into the back of a squad car on demand.

Greyson's style was fit, compact, and action-based. He wanted to be able to *do* shit, not just look like he could.

Jake snorted with laughter and headed for the men's showers. The center was small enough that the instructors had their own back room, but not their own shower room.

Of all the things Greyson wanted, that was probably number one. His own shower space, so he didn't have to see men's naked asses all over the place. Not that wasn't what he was into, but precisely *because* that was what he was into.

He drew a breath and steeled his nerves, then grabbed his towel and gym bag. He ducked through the opposite hallway door into the men's locker room and regretted once again his choice to take a class during one of the most popular times of day.

Most of the guys minded their own business, and he knew as well as them how to. He kept his eyes averted from theirs, found a spot for his bag, and stripped off for the shower, dumping his old clothes in one half of his bag. Towel around his waist, he headed for the crappy '70s-esque tiled group shower. He'd seen showers like this in more porn clips than he could count.

“Hey,” Jake jerked his chin when he noticed Greyson passing. Greyson hadn't even seen him, too busy being careful not to look either at eye level or waist level.

“Hey.” Greyson shoved his towel across the bar and turned on the water, shivering until it got hot. That helped keep his nerves cold, at least. “When's your next class?”

“Tomorrow, the advanced spin class.”

Greyson soaped up quickly. “What, you gonna teach them to do a wheelie?” he shot back across the sound of water. A couple other guys were chatting in that same “we're all naked but nothing's gay about this” casual tone.

Jake groaned. “I've never heard that one before.”

Greyson snorted with laughter. "I never said I had a sense of humor. I don't think they asked for that on the job application."

"Damn it. I should get them to add that." Jake turned off his shower and scrubbed his hair and face with the towel before wrapping it around his waist again. "I'm subbing for someone on Tuesday, I think they said."

"Bet I know who that was." Greyson sighed. One of the newer instructors, Kyle, wasn't the most responsible. He was gonna end up doing Kyle's core strength classes again next week at this rate.

"Yeah, Kyle keeps taking bookings for one-on-one sessions at the same time as his group classes." Jake strode out to the locker area again.

That was just basic stupidity, then. They got paid much better for group classes assuming the group was more than a couple people. Kyle seemed really forgetful, though. It was probably just not looking at his calendar closely enough. "Huh." Greyson turned off his shower and scrubbed off fast, avoiding looking at the other six or seven guys in the showers on the way out.

Jake was on the other side of the benches, so Greyson turned his back to him as he changed into his new outfit. "Sounds shitty. If you need me to take a class or two, I don't have a life, so..."

Jake laughed. If Greyson remembered right, he had too much of a life, so he'd be grateful for the help. He was the guy with two almost-girlfriends, after all.

"Yeah, things are getting complicated."

Greyson snorted. "Like they weren't already."

"One of them wants to take me to her cabin for a hot weekend. I'm liking the other one more, though. I think she wants to actually date me."

Greyson rolled his eyes. "Gotta pick one, dude. I keep telling you."

"But what if I pick the wrong one?" Jake tossed his towel across his bag, drawing Greyson's attention for a moment. Jake was buttoning up his jeans.

Christ, the man had abs. Greyson tried to keep his eyes on Jake's face now, and not the bulges of his arms or his toned stomach. That was the problem: every instructor here was hot, and he couldn't bang any of them. For multiple reasons.

"Well..." Greyson helplessly raised his shoulders. "You tell the other

one you need to think about shit, I don't know.” *It's a lot easier with guys.* “You're asking the wrong guy.”

Jake paused for a moment in the middle of pulling his shirt on, that perceptive flash of realization dawning on him.

*Jesus. I could have taken that a different direction.* Greyson didn't take back his comment, though. He raised his shoulders in a shrug. “I'm not the love guru. I just think it's a bad idea if one of them can find out about the other... at best, you're gonna hurt one of them. Better sooner than later.”

“Right, right,” Jake agreed, the moment passing as he pulled his shirt down. To his credit, he didn't act any different. “I know what I have to do.”

“Then do it, man.” Greyson buttoned up his shirt, pulling the sleeves down properly and running a hand over his hair.

Jake nodded. “Whatcha doing today? We should grab a drink sometime.”

The tension drained out of Greyson's shoulders. That was a hand of friendship – unless he was some closet case trying to work out his issues on him. *Again.* “Sure,” he agreed. “I can't do today, but sometime soon, for sure.”

“Great,” Jake smiled.

When Greyson glanced toward the door, he saw Alan writing on the whiteboard just inside the door. He was putting down the class schedule for the week. “Hey.”

Alan glanced at them both and nodded, his gaze flickering between the two of them. Then it cleared up. “Ah, you both just had class, huh?”

“Don't even ask,” Greyson laughed.

Alan winced and nodded. “Right, right.” He looked more at Jake than Greyson. “Just put down the new class here.”

Greyson scanned the board. It was another damn kettle bell class, of course. “Who's doing it?”

“Kyle.”

Greyson went to swap looks with Jake, but Jake was rolling his eyes at Alan.

“Right.” Greyson shook his head, then shouldered his gym bag. They couldn't publicly bitch about him, but he so wanted to.

Alan awkwardly smiled and raised a hand, then ducked out of the gym room again. Just before he did, his eyes fell to Greyson's arms. It was an unmistakable glance.

Greyson resisted the urge to flinch. *Fuck. I wasn't wrong. These tattoos better make a difference.*

Floyd

The door bell jangled and Floyd looked up with an automatic welcoming smile.

Oh, holy fuck. No way. Not *that* Peters... Not Greyson Peters.

It was.

"H-Hey," Floyd managed, his hands curling into tight fists below the counter as he shifted his stance.

Greyson was staring right back at him, standing stock-still in the entrance right in front of the door. He looked just as surprised to be walking back into Floyd's world again.

And Greyson was hot now.

Holy shit, was he ever. Greyson was chiseled and muscled, the baby face dropping away from his cheekbones and scruff wandering down his neck. His lips looked as soft as ever, but there was a darker air about his eyes. The years had aged Greyson a little faster than Floyd.

Greyson had the lean kind of strength that came with their job. No, Greyson's job... not Floyd's anymore.

As Greyson set into motion toward the counter with a shaky smile of greeting, he walked like a man now – self-assured but not overeager, like a green recruit wanting to prove himself everywhere he went in the world.

He looked calmer now, quieter, more introspective.

Christ, that was all bullshit. Floyd hadn't even talked to the man yet, but his mind was getting away from him.

"Long time no see," Floyd nodded. Just seconds had passed, but under Greyson's intense scrutiny, it felt like so much longer. Like years.

Shit. All those years ago... Greyson had been right. Did he know that now?

Greyson's eyes were locked on his now, and Floyd couldn't look away. "Years, yeah." His voice was warm but deeper now, the timbre deep in

his chest making Floyd's fingers tingle.

“Do you-- We should go out for coffee sometime.” *What the fuck? No, shut up*, Floyd reprimanded himself. The guy might well hate him now. After what had happened...

“Yeah.”

“You guys go catch up.” That was Chase, and Floyd nearly jumped out of his skin. “Whoa, sorry,” Chase laughed, holding up his hands in a peace gesture as he leaned in the hallway. “I can mind the shop as long as you need. I'm done with my appointments.”

“Thanks,” Floyd murmured. There was no way he was seeing this guy for a consultation without saying...

Saying what?

Sorry? Glad to see you again? I want to bang you like a screen door in a hurricane, so are you still straight?

Floyd's thoughts were racing and damn near impossible to control. “Just gonna grab my keys...” he mumbled, ducking into the office to do that and get a moment to himself.

Greyson was not giving him a straight vibe anymore. Not even remotely. And he wasn't giving him anything to read in body language or emotions – probably because they weren't alone.

Floyd had no idea what to expect, and it was a terrifying thrill.

What the hell was this reaction? And what was Greyson doing back here after all this time? He'd never find out if he didn't calm the fuck down.

He let out a breath and grabbed his keys, then turned to the office door again.

Time to face the music.



## Greyson

The smell of samosas, hot dogs, and pizza from nearby restaurants wafted through the air, making Greyson lick his lips. Now that he thought about it, he wouldn't mind a bite to eat.

Worse yet, the smell of cigarette smoke. Jesus fuck, he wished he hadn't quit smoking last year. He only had a craving once every few months at most now. He couldn't remember the last time he'd wanted one – but he couldn't remember the last time he'd been under this kind of pressure.

What the fuck was he going to do or say? How did Floyd end up behind the counter there, muscled and tattooed and looking like a man who took no shit?

Most important: why did Greyson *want* him so much? Floyd had softer eyes now than before, and a quicker smile. His lips were full and pink and perfect, and his jeans were tight around his muscled thighs, and...

No. This was a tangent. Greyson had recognized the voice on the phone, but thought *no way could it be the same Floyd Turner*. Apparently he was wrong.

Greyson let out a breath. As long as his ex-patrol partner hadn't gotten back together with Brett. If he had, surely he wouldn't even want to talk to him.

Greyson slipped a hand into his pocket as he leaned against the stone wall, then pinched his thigh as hard as he could.

That bled off a little of his tension, letting him breathe out a deep sigh. He breathed in again and straightened up as the shop door jangled.

“Hey.”

“Hi,” Floyd answered. He seemed to be over his shock now, lightly smiling as he joined Greyson on the sidewalk.

Fuck, he was gorgeous now. He was built broader than Greyson, as he'd always been, and he had a short-sleeved t-shirt on to show off tattoo sleeves all the way up his arms. There was no doubt he was a

tattoo artist – no piercings, so he wasn't a piercer. What did his hands feel like running over bare skin? Holy shit, he'd soon find out.

“You own that place?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow,” Greyson hummed. “I – had no idea, man. Coffee. How about, uh...” he nodded down the street to the cafe a few doors away.

“Sure.” Floyd set off into a gentle amble, looking Greyson up and down. “You still a cop?” Their history as patrol partners was still fresh in his mind, too, then.

Greyson winced. “No.” He cleared his throat, scratching at his stubble. “Uh, no. Not anymore. I quit a couple months back. Moved back here.”

“Ahh. I hadn't heard. Or seen you around, I guess.”

“No,” Greyson nodded. “I'm a fitness instructor right now.”

Floyd nodded, holding open the door for Greyson to walk through.

Greyson's cheeks heated up but he stepped through with a quick, jerky nod. “Been here before? I haven't.”

“All the time. I work right there,” Floyd gently reminded him with a teasing grin.

*Duh. Don't say stupid shit.* “Oh,” Greyson laughed. “Uh, yeah. What's good here?”

“Everything. I like the lattes.”

“Latte it is.”

They grabbed coffees, each paying for their own and leaving the change, then took them to a corner table. Floyd asked for it to go, so Greyson did, too. The whole time, they carefully maintained a distance of a few feet, glancing at each other now and again. It felt like a first date.

Only once they were tucked in the corner did Floyd's shoulders relax a little as he leaned back to take Greyson in as Greyson did exactly the same.

“Right. So, I... own that place now,” Floyd explained after a moment. “After stuff happened, I decided I should be a tattoo artist. I sort of stumbled into the ownership bit.”

Greyson nodded. *Stuff happened?* He couldn't ask, though.

"I went off the rails," Floyd explained concisely. "I had my epiphany and made a go of it. I got into competitive archery, got a little more confidence, and wound up here."

"Ohhh." Greyson winced. "Did you... uh, I mean, was it...?"

"You can say his name. Brett. No. I broke up with him right after you left."

Horrible as it sounded, Greyson had never been more thankful.

"Oh, good--"

"Thanks to you."

Greyson knew his cheeks were burning. He opened his mouth, then gave a sheepish little laugh. "That's not... I know I fucked up before."

"So did I."

Greyson hesitated, then reached out a hand across the table. Floyd didn't hesitate to take it, and Greyson's nerves crackled with electricity at the warm touch of the firm palm against his own. "We're good?"

"Good."

They pumped hands once, and Greyson was surprised to find how breathless he felt once Floyd let go.

He wanted that hand on him... somewhere else. Anywhere else.

Oh, Jesus, he was gonna get hard if he didn't think of something else fast. Not the moment.

"I listened to you, years too late," Greyson laughed quietly. "That's how I ended up quitting or being driven out, doesn't really matter. I'm not really welcome there anymore. So I'm back here doing fitness classes, and... that's kinda nice. I know a lot about it."

"Yeah, you always did," Floyd nodded. "I'm sorry that happened."

Greyson smiled. "Thanks. It's all right. I prefer this life anyway. Pension's crap, but the hours are better."

Floyd laughed, the first genuine smile spreading across his face as Greyson grinned at him. "Actually," Floyd added, "I've been meaning to pick up some kind of sport. I do pushups at home and shit, but nothing proper. I dropped archery after last season. Got bored, I guess."

“You should come along,” Greyson instantly invited him. “Group class or one-on-one. It's great. I work at the Y. I'll get those arms trained up again.”

Floyd smiled broadly. “I'd like that.”

“God, it's so weird,” Greyson laughed quietly. “You haven't changed a bit, and yet... you know, suddenly tattooed all over...”

“It wasn't that sudden,” Floyd laughed. “Might be for you – you still walk like a cop.”

Greyson rolled his eyes, but he knew it was true. He admired how Floyd had utterly cut it out of his whole behavior – he slouched and sprawled, his arm along the back of the chair next to his. He ambled instead of striding, hands in his pockets instead of at the ready.

He'd been quick to leave the force, after all.

“I got this one two years after I quit, and it was my first.” Floyd pulled his t-shirt sleeve up to show a bear paw etched across his shoulder. It was intricately woven into the top of his tattoo sleeve now.

“Right,” Greyson laughed. “They all look great. Speaking of which...”

Floyd's eyes lit up. “Right! The consultation. We should do that in the shop so I can sketch and stuff. Take this with us?”

Greyson took his cup and stood up, shouldering his way out from the corner first and leading them back to the shop. He could swear he felt Floyd's eyes flicker down to his ass, but maybe that was just wishful thinking.

Floyd

“Okay,” Floyd cracked his knuckles once they were settled in the back room. He'd hoped taking Greyson to his work space instead of the place he'd taken three of his first dates in the last couple years would make him focus.

It really didn't.

Greyson's forearms were still rippling distractingly under his long sleeves, his pecs rounding under his shirt in ways that made Floyd want to rub them.

He was *hot* for his former partner. That was fucking weird.

“I'm looking for...” Greyson unbuttoned his shirt, then hesitated two buttons down, his cheeks suddenly scarlet. “Oh, do you min--”

“No,” Floyd quickly interrupted, waving him on. “I mean, yeah, go on.”

Greyson *had* flirted with him once or twice back then, Floyd was sure of it. Maybe just in that casual way that meant he was comfortable in his sexuality... but maybe not. Now Floyd was starting to think he'd been gay all along.

“Arm? Shoulder?” Floyd asked.

“Arms, both of them. Sleeves.”

Floyd whistled. Did he have others? From a quick glance at his bare torso and chest – bare and *ripped*, Jesus Christ – it didn't look like it. “Starting with sleeves? Normally I won't do that.”

“I know,” Greyson sighed. “I've just been saving up for these rather than doing them in pieces.”

“Right.” Floyd nodded, glancing quickly at those rippling biceps. “Full sleeves? You've got lots of skin to work with.” *Work mode. Strictly work mode, please*, he begged himself. He didn't want to think about how much he wanted to straddle those hot thighs and grind himself against Greyson's hot stomach...

“Yeah. I know it's expensive.”

"That was gonna be my first thing," Floyd laughed, focusing once again on Greyson's eyes.

The chemistry between them was so intense he could have cut it with a knife. Surely to God Greyson felt that, too.

Greyson nodded once. "I wanna go from about here," he gestured along his shoulder, "down to the wrist."

"The full length? Okay. Do you have designs in mind?"

"Well... did you do your own ones?"

Floyd immediately pointed out the parts of his forearms that he'd done himself. "It was a real bitch to do on myself, but yeah, all of that is mine. That isn't. This is..."

As he pointed out his own work, woven amongst other artists', Greyson's eyes followed his finger, and he absentmindedly licked his lips.

*He has to feel it.*

"Okay. That's a lot like the style I want."

"Perfect," Floyd grinned. "Like you planned it."

"What? No. No, I had no idea it was you," Greyson scoffed, and Floyd raised his eyebrows at the defensive moment. Instantly, Greyson chuckled it off. "Sorry. I just didn't want you to think I was stalking you or something."

Floyd smirked. "Don't worry. I can look after myself." *These days a lot more than back then.* A shiver ran down his spine and he focused again on Greyson here and shirtless in front of him, not struggling under his hands to punch his boyfriend one more time...

Telling Brett he didn't deserve Floyd.

Now, Floyd knew he'd been right.

"I – um, the thing is, I don't know if I can get it done over these."

Greyson flipped his inner arms over to show Floyd, his expression suddenly steely. White scars crossed his forearms from side to side, some angular and some deeper than others.

Floyd had long since trained the reaction out of himself. He'd seen scars of all kinds and tattooed over them. It was surprisingly common in all ages, but especially younger people. Guys his own age and younger.

“Let's see. The only important thing is if they're old enough.”

“Six, seven months.”

Floyd took a step closer to Greyson, who was still sitting on the tattoo chair with his arms facing up. “Can I...?”

Greyson nodded, and Floyd wrapped one hand around the underside of one of his forearms to steady it while he ran his finger down the lines. They didn't feel that bad, compared to some he'd seen. He'd worked on worse.

Greyson's arm hair tickled against his fingertips, and a muscle twitched under his touch. They were close – close enough that Floyd could swear he felt Greyson's breath against his chest.

Floyd stepped back and let go of Greyson's arm, his body still crackling with the tension. “Yeah, I can do them as long as there's nothing fresh.”

Greyson jerkily nodded. “There won't be.”

“Then yeah, I can.” Floyd was surprised, despite his professionalism. Greyson, of all people? He'd never seen that in him. Mind you, it was always the people you didn't expect. He just hoped Greyson was getting help for that shit.

“Good.” Greyson looked so relieved Floyd wanted to punch his shoulder and tease him, just to break the tension. “I was thinking gray ink, actually. Dot work, if I can. Angel wing feathers from here to down to here... blending into nature scenery around the, uh... forearms...” *Around the scars*, Floyd thought as Greyson finished, “I think that'd look nice.”

“That'd be kickass,” Floyd agreed, his mind already spinning with designs as he got a good look at Greyson's arms. There was so much muscle there that he had a pretty big canvas to work with. “I need a bit of time to sketch this up, though.”

“Yeah, of course.”

“How about you come back...” Floyd pulled his phone out. “Right, it's Tuesday...”

“Forgetting your days of the week?” Greyson laughed. He pulled his shirt back on, quickly buttoning up again. That made it easier to focus, at least.

“Shut up,” Floyd laughed. “Come back Friday. Friday evening? You working?”

"No, that's fine. I'd work before that. My classes are pretty much every day, actually," Greyson told him. "Sunday's my day off, though."

Floyd smiled. "Yeah? Cool. Friday evening. So, tattoo-wise, if you want this done fast, we can do sessions every Friday."

"That's fine," Greyson quickly answered. "That's perfect."

Floyd smiled, then punched Greyson's arm lightly. "Awesome."

"Thanks." Greyson pushed himself to his feet, and there was an awkward moment where they took each other in. Was this a handshake? A hug? A hand-clasp?

Floyd gripped Greyson's hand and shook it firmly, then leaned in for a half-hug. "It's great to see you again, man," he said, and he meant it.

Greyson relaxed and clapped his back in return. "You, too." He was smiling again, just like the old days. That darkness had lifted for a moment, his eyes sparkling. "Even if you've bulked out. Fuckin' unfair. You always gained so much easier." Floyd hadn't had to lift as hard as Greyson to get the same gains, and he'd gotten lazy.

"I like to challenge you," Floyd smirked, letting go of Greyson's hand and opening the door to walk him out. "You're welcome."

"Jesus," Greyson snorted. "I'd like to see you *try*."

Floyd jerked his chin. "Maybe I will," he laughed. He had no idea how well he'd do in a gym, but he could certainly try.

It would mean spending more time around Greyson again. He suddenly remembered all those long hours spent just quietly sitting in the cold patrol car together. His mind, his heart, and his dick were all in agreement that he wanted more of that again. He just had to figure out which of those things won out.

"See you Friday."

As the shop door swung closed, Floyd felt Chase's eyes on him. He'd never been more thankful for anything when Chase didn't ask, and just let him head to the back room to wipe down the chair and grab his sketch book.

Floyd wouldn't have known how to answer yet.



## Greyson

Greyson was almost shaking from adrenaline and nerves.

When he'd called for a consultation, that voice had sounded familiar, but he hadn't suspected it in the slightest. Floyd, of all people, working at some sketchy tattoo place?

Well, not *that* sketchy... it was actually pretty clean and bright. Nowhere near as sketchy as the other one he'd checked out.

But this was exactly what he needed: tattoos to keep him from relapsing. The temptation was still there, crawling under his skin, and the last six months had been fucking hard-fought.

Greyson ignored the voice in the back of his mind that reminded him he hadn't always won that battle. He'd just kept his arms clean. His thighs were always a safe bet.

"Jesus," he whispered under his breath, rubbing his face. He could use a meal and a drink, just to ground him after that experience.

Seeing Floyd again...

He was still unmistakably gay. This time, Greyson was willing to admit to himself that he was, too.

That didn't mean anything had to happen. But what did it mean that he *wanted* it to?

Greyson chose a pub nearby and ate at the bar, barely noticing anyone around him. Fish and chips was exactly what he wanted right now – fat and salt and vinegar.

Best of all, a nice cold beer.

"Hey."

It was Greyson's turn to nearly jump out of his skin. He'd almost laughed at how Floyd had let himself be snuck up on earlier, but then he went and did the same damn thing.

One of the guys he knew from high school... a year below him, if he remembered right. Jackson Riley. Everyone from high school seemed

to be back here these days.

Oh yeah! Jackson was the gay blacksmith. What a combination.

Greyson shifted and reached out a hand to shake hard. "Hey, Jackson, right? Long time no see."

"You too. You living back here or what?"

Greyson nodded. "I've been back a couple months now. I think I'm gonna spend a few years here. Who knows?"

"Yeah? Cool," Jackson smiled. "You doing good? You're a cop, huh?"

"Was. Out in Alberta. Back here teaching classes at the Y now."

"Oh yeah?" Jackson smiled. "If I needed more of a workout I'd hit you up," he laughed. "But..."

"You're the blacksmith, aren't you? I heard about you," Greyson nodded. "Kinda hard not to."

"The gay blacksmith," Jackson corrected him with a roll of his eyes. He saw right through that attempt to be polite.

Greyson laughed. "That too, maybe." The town was damn small, after all. Ever since finding out he was gay – by way of his relationship status on Facebook back in Alberta – his mother had filled him in on the gay men in town. She was nosy, so he felt like he knew them all already.

If rumor was right, it wasn't just Jackson who was gay, either. "Are your brothers...?"

"Yep," Jackson laughed. "You heard about them, too, huh?"

Greyson shrugged. "My mom was always nosy."

Jackson snorted, then gestured over at the table. "We're all having drinks right now, actually. You wanna join us?"

Greyson wasn't sure what kind of company he'd be. Not with this restless itch of pent-up tension crawling under his skin.

But it would be rude to say no.

"Sure." Greyson pushed back his empty plate and grabbed his beer, following Jackson over to the table.

There were already half a dozen other guys sitting around the table, and Greyson recoiled with surprise. He didn't remember their family being *that* large.

He vaguely recognized Cam, mostly because he looked a bit like his older brother.

“Hey, guys. This is Greyson. He was in the year above me, and I think we got stuck together in one of those shitty grade 11-12 mixed psychology classes...”

Greyson laughed. He'd forgotten about that. “Yeah, we did. Hi.”

No, he recognized a couple of these guys. Cam was definitely the hockey player. He'd seen the artsy-looking one somewhere around, and maybe one of the others. Small towns.

One by one, he met Cam and Thomas, Jackson's brothers, and their boyfriends Noah and Alex respectively.

“And this is my boyfriend, Chase...”

He was tattooed, too, but he looked a little more feminine than Floyd. A lot more, actually. “Hi.”

“And Ryan, who we've adopted. He's a buddy of ours.”

Greyson laughed and nodded. “Hey.”

“Okay, that's everyone, until Floyd gets here.” Greyson must have looked stunned, because Jackson glanced at him. “You know him? Oh yeah, he'd be about your age.”

“We... know each other, yeah,” Greyson laughed, trying to keep it casual now. “I just went in to see him today, actually.”

“Oh, at work?” Chase asked.

“He's Chase's boss.”

Small *fucking* towns.

“No way,” Greyson laughed. “Yeah, for tattoos. He's drawing up some designs.”

“Awesome,” Chase approved. He punched Jackson's shoulder. “This guy got one of mine.”

“Several of yours, I think,” Jackson smirked, the innuendo clear. They pecked lips while Cam rolled his eyes and Thomas snorted.

“Jesus,” Noah laughed, looking at Greyson instead. “So you work around here?”

Greyson nodded. “At the YMCA. I teach fitness classes.”

“Oh, yeah? What kind?”

“Every kind, mostly strength conditioning and core strength and weight machines. I don't really go in for spin,” Greyson chuckled.

Noah frowned. “Oh, those are my favorites.”

“We'll get you lifting more than a peanut butter jar someday,” Cam teased.

“Don't need to. I have you for that.” Noah grinned cheekily at Cam, then looked back at Greyson. “Sorry. Ryan's always saying it gets a bit much being out with us.”

“Yeahhh,” Ryan groaned, swigging his beer as Greyson laughed. “They supply me with booze though.”

“That's what friends are for.”

“Oh, hey, Floyd – guess who we picked up?” Jackson grinned.

Greyson turned to see Floyd approaching, and as they made eye contact, Floyd's jaw dropped. “No way. You're everywhere suddenly,” Floyd said.

“Sorry,” Greyson laughed, not sure yet if that was a bad thing or not. He was half-ready to leave.

“No, no. Don't go.” Floyd sounded a bit too quick to say that, which was intriguing.

Greyson settled down and nodded, letting Floyd pull up another chair next to him instead as they all scooted over.

“Just ate?” Floyd asked.

“Yeah. Have you?”

Floyd smiled. “I grabbed a bite before I came.”

Their shoulders almost brushed with so many of them crammed around the table, but Greyson made himself focus on anything but that. “So you know all these guys?”

“I somehow got roped into it, yeah,” Floyd laughed. “I hired Chase, and then one thing led to another...”

“And we decided we'd keep him,” Alex grinned. “Actually, no, he was around before me...”

“He was. You're the newcomer. Shush, newcomer.”

Alex groaned. "I've been the newcomer for months now. Technically, I've known Thomas--"

"Newcomer," Jackson and Cam said simultaneously to drown him out, and Greyson laughed heartily. Alex gave them the middle finger.

Even though it was mostly family members around the table, the atmosphere was warm and welcoming. He couldn't remember the last time he'd sat in this big a group of men and not felt... weird about it, in one way or another.

It was easy to relax into a few beers with the group. They talked sports, beer, and weather.

When the conversation hit Alberta, though, at least Greyson had a few things to offer. "Things are getting rough there. A lot of guys getting laid off."

"Yeah, some of them are coming back home," Jackson nodded seriously.

Thomas clicked his tongue. "None of them saved up what they made. I see it at the bank, too. You make a six-figure income, you should have a damn house within a couple years. But they blow it on sex and drugs..."

"Not even worthwhile stuff, like art," Noah muttered. *That* was where Greyson had seen him – some art gallery show he'd gone to with a blind date. Everyone laughed at that reaction. "What?"

"Nothing. You're right," Cam smiled, hugging Noah around the shoulders before looking back at Greyson. "So you worked out there or what?"

"Yeah, as a cop."

"Ooof." Several of them were wincing sympathetically already while Floyd leaned back a little to watch him.

Greyson nodded tightly. "There's some... messed-up shit that happens when you give a bunch of stupid young guys a lot of money and nowhere to spend it."

But however many drunken bar fights he'd gone to, it was nothing compared to the domestic violence cases.

Like *that* one. The fucker. It still made his blood boil.

"Glad to be back here, then, huh?" That was Floyd, his voice soft and understanding. Greyson almost cringed at the knowledge that he knew

exactly how deeply some of those memories had imprinted on him.

“Yeah.”

Cam cleared his throat. “Here's to that.” They all toasted Greyson, whose cheeks burned with embarrassment as he lifted his beer to clink with theirs.

“To Fredericton,” Greyson agreed. What a phrase to toast to. He'd never thought he'd hear *that* one.

A few beers later, everyone was more relaxed, and Floyd was only looking hotter.

Damn it, it was hard to stay focused with Floyd right in his peripheral vision, his eyes attentive and his arms folded along the table in front of him. His lashes were still long, framing those pretty eyes. He was built solid, though – the kind of guy Greyson would wrestle into bed.

Christ, the thought made his dick twitch. Why the fuck was he thinking of his old partner naked and gasping his name? He needed to get laid.

Jackson's raised voice made Greyson flinch with surprise, his cheeks burning. Had he just been too obvious? But it wasn't that. “Okay, Floyd's almost done,” Jackson laughed.

Greyson grinned. “We're *all* done, I think.”

Floyd pushed himself to his feet. “I'm fine, but yeah, I gotta get home. Work and all.”

“I'll go with you,” Cam started to offer, but Greyson shook his head.

“I'll go. We can talk more about the tattoo designs anyway. I had a couple more ideas.”

Floyd lit up. “I'll talk tattoos all night.”

“I know he will,” Chase groaned into his beer, prompting another round of laughter. “Good luck with him.”

Greyson snorted and raised a hand to wave to the guys. “Thanks, guys. See you all around.”

He and Floyd picked their way around tables and out of the stiflingly warm pub. It had been ages since he'd enjoyed himself so much. He tried not to think about why that might be, but Floyd was just... right there.

“Back this way,” Floyd told him. “Still the same apartment. Where do

you live?"

"Same way, in a house. Close to where... Jesus, you haven't moved? In, like, *a decade*?"

"Rent's good."

Greyson laughed. "Wow. It must be." Floyd's place was vaguely familiar to him – he'd been over a couple times when they were the newest cops, getting to know each other as partners on and off the job. It had been a damn nice little apartment in a downtown building.

He walked with Floyd past the dark shops and brightly-lit bars until they got to the edge of downtown, then crossed to the residential streets. Neither of them said much along the way, just enjoying the buzz of a few drinks and a lot of laughter. They exchanged numbers, and Greyson's heart fluttered with pleasure that he got to have Floyd's number again.

"I'm glad you came out," Floyd finally spoke up.

Greyson's lips twitched. "Me, too. And came here tonight."

Floyd's eyebrows shot up, and he started to laugh. "Dude."

*Well, that wasn't subtle.* Greyson snorted, too, then joined in Floyd's laughter. "Yeah..." They crossed the street, still laughing.

When Floyd's surprise settled, he peered at him. "I always wondered."

Greyson shrugged. "Yeah. I was confused or whatever."

"I'm glad," Floyd nodded, his voice simple and sincere. Then, he cleared his throat. "Not that you were confused back then, but that you're better now--"

"Yeah, I know. I'm glad too."

Greyson still remembered the moment he'd learned a tough guy like Floyd actually went home to another man. It had been like a wakeup call, but one he'd slept through as long as possible. In Alberta, surrounded by hot young men and not much else, it had finally been impossible to ignore.

"You look good now," Floyd added. "Happier?"

"Yeah. Definitely. So do you," Greyson told him. They were approaching Floyd's apartment, and his stomach twisted with this regret. This conversation was *almost* getting somewhere...

"Thanks. I sure as hell am, too."

They stopped outside Floyd's building door, facing each other now. Floyd's hair was pushed back, his eyes hazy from the same drinks Greyson felt tingling through his hands.

It might have been the alcohol, or the quiet night around them pushing them together like they'd been planning it all along.

Either way, they rocked forward, hands grasping each other's shoulders for brief moments, eyes closing and lips touching...

Lips pressing hard, wet, and warm. Sliding, caressing each other's, kissing like they were born to it. Floyd took a step forward and Greyson's hand ran down his spine to the small of his back as they kissed with desperate, tiny gasps for breath.

Then Floyd's eyes flew open at the same moment's as Greyson as the impulsive moment gave way to realization.

They were kissing.

Shit.

Greyson's cheeks paled as Floyd stared at him, neither of them willing to quite acknowledge that moment, even if they both seemed to sway slightly with the impulse to step closer again.

"See you."

"Bye."

Floyd disappeared inside and Greyson stayed there for a minute more, his lips still parted as his chest pounded. That... That shouldn't have felt so heavenly.

That was chemistry, plain and simple. The kind that made him want to jump into bed with Floyd, undress him, see what they had in common these days. The kind that made his head spin with desire. The kind that... made him want to do really impulsive, stupid shit.

That was impulsive *and* stupid.

*Don't kiss your ex-partner. Especially that ex-partner. Isn't that rule one?*

And... Friday. They were still on for Friday. Greyson couldn't avoid Floyd for long.



## Floyd

Since going stone-cold sober, Floyd got hangovers really easily... especially off beer. But Floyd didn't regret this hangover for a second.

He wasn't sure he would have ever got the courage to kiss Greyson without a couple beers in them both. Then again, doing it that way meant he didn't know if Greyson's interest extended past a couple beers and walking him home.

On Friday, when they saw each other, he had to sort this out.

He couldn't slip back into this habit. Drinking wasn't going to cure a damn thing – he'd learned that years ago, after all. It might have been a social lubricant, but for their second interaction, he couldn't let that happen again.

In the meantime, he had his headache and stomach ache to take care of, and then he had to get himself adjusted to light, and then... ready to drive.

“Fuck.”

He had to drive his mother around shopping today, of all things. Floyd rubbed his eyes and then his face, slowly rolling out of bed for the shower. A shower would help.

This was far from the first time he'd dealt with a hangover, but it was getting harder every year. He was almost thirty, and though most of the time the years passed without much changing, he felt it when it came to his alcohol tolerance.

Floyd rubbed himself dry, walking slowly back to his bedroom to pull on clean, comfortable clothes – old jeans and a t-shirt, and a light zip-up sweater.

When he was dressed, he made his cautious way to the kitchen for toast and orange juice, then gulped down pills. It took scrambled eggs and bacon before he felt semi-decent again, and he didn't bother cleaning up the dishes yet. He could do that when he got home.

He was already going to be a couple minutes late picking up his mother. More and he'd just get yelled at.

Floyd grabbed his sketchbook and pens on the way out the door. He walked as quickly as he dared to the car, shielding his eyes against the light, even though his body was fast shrugging off the effects of the extra beer or two last night. He wasn't entirely sure how many that had been, but there'd been a day he could slam a six-pack and not even feel it.

It was probably just as well he felt it now. That was probably how normal people reacted, not... people with issues like he'd once had.

As he pulled up in his parents' driveway, Floyd already saw his mother leaving the house, her handbag on her arm and her lips pursed tightly.

*Oh, shit. I'm in for it.*

"Good afternoon," she emphasized as she climbed into the passenger seat, and Floyd glanced at the clock. Only eight minutes past noon.

"Sorry I'm late," Floyd said automatically, avoiding her gaze as he waited for her to buckle up, then pulled back down the driveway.

She eyed him critically, and he could just *feel* the comments itching at her tongue. *Might as well get them out*, he thought bitterly. Sure enough, moments later, she told him, "You don't look like you're ready to shop."

"I'm staying in the car. I have some work I have to get done."

"Hm."

Floyd adjusted his sun visor. "Where are you going to first?"

"The glasses place. I need to pick up my prescription."

"Right. Which one do you go to?" Floyd asked.

"The same one I used to take your brother to."

*Aaand there it is. The guilt trip, all over again.* It was the same tired guilt trip she used every damn time he did anything she didn't approve of. His little brother, dead for six years now, was still a weapon against him. And it was always "your brother" instead of his name – Ethan.

Ethan, a year younger than Floyd, had killed himself in college. In some fucked-up way, it was the first reason Floyd had signed up as a cop – so he could try to save others.

But that was old news now.

Floyd swallowed down his annoyance as always and straightened up in the driver's seat, not bothering to respond yet. He merged into

traffic to drive them up toward the clinic.

“Your brother was always on time,” his mother continued, her lips twisting. “Always showed up a few minutes early, didn't he?”

“All right, I'm sorry,” Floyd muttered, a bit sharper than he'd meant to. “I already said sorry.”

“I just think it's inconsiderate to keep me waiting.”

He didn't answer. *Don't take the bait.* “What time is your appointment?”

“I don't have one. I'm just picking my prescription up.”

“Mm.” *Damn. That would keep her out of the car for a while.* Floyd felt terrible thinking it, but some days, there was no talking to her.

And he couldn't complain. They still accepted him even after the couple years of uselessness. He'd mooched off them and felt sorry for himself after quitting the force and before opening the shop.

That was the other thing he tried not to think about too much. Between his brother's death and quitting his parents' dream job for him, he was something of a disappointment to his family. They didn't even know why things had ended with Brett – they'd liked him a lot.

He rubbed his face again, trying to will away the buzz of medication and frustration upsetting his stomach.

When she stepped out and walked into the clinic, he sat back and grabbed his sketchbook, letting a mental image of Greyson's arms come into his head.

Lots of canvas to work with. God, they were going to look good.

## Kevin

The phone rang several times, and Kevin frowned to himself as he rubbed his cheeks. He was waking up early considering it was the day after a game, but Floyd's last text had been cryptic. It had just said, *I hate mornings.*

He worried about Floyd more these days, since he'd left. They'd bonded quickly as soon as Chase had introduced them. While Floyd was easy enough to get along with, there was a lot more to him that he just didn't talk about.

Chase was probably his other closest friend, and he'd promised Kevin he'd keep an eye on him, but even so...

"Hello," he finally heard Floyd's scratchy morning voice answer.

"Hey," Kevin greeted. "It's me. How you doin'?"

"Oooof," Floyd groaned his complaint. "Out driving my mother around doing errands and shit. How'd the practice game go?"

"Not bad. This trainer is intense," Kevin laughed. "Cam's right about that. He caught... a few weaknesses, I guess... and sort of yelled them across the ice..." He imitated Glenn's voice. "Back-checking, Kevin! Fight for your space, Kevin!"

Floyd laughed. "Well, at least he doesn't bullshit you."

"He sure doesn't." Kevin rolled out of bed, rubbing his face. "What's up with this morning? Other than your mother?"

"Hangover," Floyd said simply.

Kevin winced. He knew Floyd had once had an issue with drinking – Floyd usually turned down beers after the third or fourth one, and he'd only once let that slip – but he didn't know why. "You went on a bender, eh?"

"Not intentionally. Just got carried away. Hanging out with the guys, and then someone else showed up."

"Who's that?" Kevin's interest was piqued.

"Some guy I once knew from the force."

"The..." *Oh yeah, he was a cop before.* Floyd had mentioned that once or twice, too. God, he was mysterious sometimes. "Right, no, never mind. As a cop?"

"Yeah."

"That must've been good." *Or maybe not,* Kevin thought, wincing. "Right?"

"Yeah, more or less." There was something off in Floyd's voice. "So, talk to me about camp, though."

"It's... I don't know how to describe it," Kevin laughed. "It's living and breathing the damn sport." His roommate, Hans, was a lot less charitable: he described it as hell on ice, then roller blades, then staircases...

But Kevin liked the challenge. New exercises, new routines, and Glenn never let them get old. He'd only been there a week and he'd already played practices in every position – with other guys and alone – just to help Glenn assess his skills. He'd done about eight types of sports, plus tried new gym exercises his old coach had never suggested.

It was a whole new league here.

"All the guys are great, though," he continued. "I've talked to them about Cam a bit and most of them knew him. Everyone mentioned Matty as his best friend," he laughed. "I only met the guy once, though, when they introduced us all to each other. Did they ever...?"

"What?" Floyd exclaimed with a laugh. "Cam and Matty?"

Kevin laughed. "I don't know, man. It seems pretty... gay here."

Floyd burst out laughing. "Really?"

"Really. I mean, loudly straight, but quietly gay..." He couldn't say a lot more with his roommate in the same apartment, maybe listening in, though. "Anyway, it's great here."

Kevin didn't want to admit he missed their chosen family of friends and boyfriends.

"How's it gonna go on the road?"

"Good, I hope," Kevin admitted. "Assuming I ever go. I keep screwing up like this..."

"You'll be fine," Floyd assured him, that deep voice oddly calming. He

had that certain way of calming people, and Kevin wasn't even sure Floyd knew it. Maybe he did, though. It would be a useful skill for a tattoo artist.

"So what's your family up to now?"

"Mom's got me driving her all around town," Floyd lamented. "And, like I said, hangover... it's not so bad though. It's getting better now. I was a couple minutes late, though, so she started with passive-aggression..."

"Ohhh. Ouch," Kevin winced. From the tiny hints Floyd had dropped – again, subtly, because the man didn't seem to like to admit to his problems – it sounded like his parents were a little overbearing.

"It's cool though."

Kevin disagreed, but he kept that to himself. "Got your eye on anyone out there that I don't know about?"

Floyd groaned. "Kevin. Jesus, it's been like a week."

Kevin laughed. "So what? You can meet someone in a week. If you're like the Rileys, you can practically get engaged in a week..."

"Ohhh," Floyd laughed, but finally it was a hearty sound. "I'll tell them you said that."

"They can't deny it!" Kevin noticed that Floyd hadn't actually answered the question, where he usually would have given an exhausted, *No*, groan. Particularly given his worries about finding someone to come with him to the reunion...

"Mmm," Floyd said, cutting off his train of thought before he could form the question. "So what about you?"

Kevin hesitated, scratching at his head. It was still too early to say, but...

"I can't afford to fuck things up," Kevin told him. "So... no. I'm just keeping my head down. I don't know who's who yet."

"Of course." Floyd sounded sympathetic. "I know exactly what that's like."

From being a cop? Well, yeah, actually... now that he thought about it, that seemed like a similar environment. Kevin nodded to himself. "It gets easier though, huh?"

"Definitely. Okay, I gotta eat and hit the gym again."

“Okay. You take care, eh?” Floyd told him.

“You too, man.” For all Kevin's worries, Floyd sounded all right. “Keep me in the loop.”

“Will do. Bye.”

Once he hung up, Kevin pulled his covers up to halfheartedly make his bed, then turned to ruffle his hair in the mirror and try to wake up.

*I hope Floyd's okay out there with all those lovebirds.* Kevin knew how easy it was to compare himself to everyone else around getting some and feel... lacking.

Floyd was a great guy, though. He'd find someone. Maybe, just maybe... he already had met the right guy. Floyd just had to convince *himself* of it.

## Greyson

“So, you busy tonight?”

Greyson hadn't expected Alan to initiate conversation. After that weird exchange or two, he'd just written him off. Now, as he leaned against the desk to check the sign-in list for his class, Alan was talking to him?

He'd take it, though.

“Not very. Just one class, and then... working out by myself, at last.” Greyson laughed. It was weird after working everyone else out, but he often didn't get the kind of burn he craved from it. He spent too much time teaching and correcting – not that he minded that.

“I meant after work.”

*Oh, shit.* Greyson's eyebrows shot up and he paused, then shook his head. “No.” *I'll let him ask me out, though...*

Alan casually turned to write his number on a scrap of paper and held it out. “You wanna meet me?”

That was ballsy. Greyson took the paper automatically and glanced at it, then paused. *What if people think I'm... exploiting my job somehow? Oh, fuck it.*

“Sure.”

The thrill that ran through him wasn't entirely victorious. That was odd.

“See you soon.” Alan winked.

Greyson's chest lurched with realization. *Ohhhh. Shit, no.* He couldn't believe it. One fucking kiss with Floyd last night – one hard kiss, yeah, but one nonetheless... and now he was ready to swear off other men? That was fucking stupid. He'd been eying Alan for weeks now.

Greyson reminded himself that he'd *wanted* this.

“See you,” he answered with a grin, then strode casually to the back room. He kept the paper still clutched tightly in his fist. “Ohhh, fuck,” he whispered once he got there at last, leaning against the locker and



thumping his head.

That was stupid.

Greyson was going to enjoy himself, damn it.

“What's up?”

It was the second time in as many days someone snuck up on him, and Greyson's heart lurched again as he jolted. “Jesus.”

“Sorry,” Jake laughed, stepping out from the storage room with yoga mats under his arm. “Everything okay?”

“Fine, fine,” Greyson assured him with a laugh. “Just tired. Out late last night. Gotta sweat out the beer.”

Jake laughed. “I feel that,” he agreed, reaching out for an awkward fist bump on the way by as he juggled the yoga mats under his arm.

Greyson chewed his lip, then opened his fist again once Jake was gone to program the number into his phone under *Alan*.

---

That night, Greyson texted Alan an hour or so after he left the gym. He took the time to eat supper, shower properly, and change into another long-sleeved light shirt and jeans. It was still only eight or so, hopefully early enough in the evening that it wasn't too weird. He sent a simple text.

*Hey, it's Greyson.*

Alan's response was instant.

*Hi. Wanna come over?*

Greyson licked his lips. Alan wasn't wasting any time.

*Sure, what's your address?*

Alan answered with it at almost the same moment, like he'd already been composing the message. Greyson stared at it until the address registered, then pocketed his phone and set out for the drive.

When he pulled up outside the well-lit little house, Greyson raised his eyebrows. Alan was here? On his own, or with someone? It looked like a small house, maybe two or three bedrooms at most... a starter home for a couple, or a good home for a single.

The outside was immaculate, though. Alan was *definitely* gay.

Greyson laughed under his breath, locking his car and walking up the path toward the front door. When he knocked, Alan was quick enough to answer.

It was strange seeing his coworker in his own house instead of behind the Y desk. The house was clean and bright, and there was no sign of anyone else around. "Hey," Greyson said.

Alan held the door open for him. "Hi. How's it going?"

"Good, good. Had a good day at work?"

"Fine," Alan shrugged. His eyes were already wandering up and down Greyson's body as he pushed the door shut. His shirt was only halfway buttoned up, his feet bare.

Greyson decided to cut to the chase. "I'm not here for coffee, am I?"

Alan hesitated, then jerked his chin in a quick nod. "No."

"I knew it." Greyson smirked, stepping slowly closer to get into Alan's space. "You were playing hard-to-get, weren't you?"

Alan grinned. "I wanted to make you work for it," he retorted. "Come on in."

They walked together to the couch, but before Greyson could even sit down, Alan was pushing him onto his back along the length of it.

That was fine by him. Greyson's nerves sparked, and he hissed a quiet approval through his teeth as Alan rolled onto the couch, his face at crotch level.

*Blowjobs? That's cool.*

"You want me to...?" Alan murmured, his hand running up the inside of Greyson's thigh until Greyson shuddered with wanting.

"I do."

Alan crouched above Greyson as he pushed his shirt up, kissing his stomach and lapping at his abs. Greyson was used to guys being impressed by them, so he hauled up his shirt a little further and Alan cast an appreciative look up and down.

Then, Alan slid the button out of his jeans and pulled them down around Greyson's thighs, his fingers wrapping around his cock and pulling it out into open air.

The forthright attention had Greyson half-hard already with imagining – those pretty, full lips wrapped around his cock... Mmm.

Alan licked the head and whispered, "I love getting glimpses of this through your sweatpants. You oughta go commando more."

Greyson's eyebrows shot up, and then he grinned. He only did now and then, but apparently, Alan had been watching. "Yeah? Maybe I will," he teased.

Alan smirked, his lips closing around the tip as he sucked the hardening flesh into his mouth. Hot, wet warmth enveloped him and sank down to the base, and the ridges of his palate rubbed across the head.

"Mmm." Greyson rolled his head back, his hips arching a little until Alan pushed on his stomach to get him to stay flat. Alan's mouth worked around him, his tongue lapping under and around his cock as he sucked his cheeks in.

Floyd would look hotter sucking him off.

*Ohhhh, shit. Nope. Don't even fucking go there!* Greyson had a strict rule against thinking of one guy while he was with another.

Still, the image of Floyd's rippling muscles and dark, penetrating eyes and big, rough hands wouldn't leave his head.

Especially *those* beautiful, wet lips wrapping around his cock.

Greyson swallowed a moan and curled his fingers into the couch while Alan sucked him harder, bobbing his head in a quick, up-and-down rhythm not meant to prolong this.

Picturing Floyd's hands wandering over his body, touching him with the same firm, yet gentle grip as he'd used on Greyson's arm while evaluating him...

Or the firmness of his handshake...

How good would those fingers feel wrapped around his cock?

"Nnh-- almost--" Greyson started to warn Alan.

"Mmm." Alan pulled back a little but let Greyson's cock stay on his tongue as he sucked the head.

"Jesus!" When he came, Greyson squeezed his eyes shut, his body's tension finally coiling up once more, as tightly as possible, before his muscles spasmed and released. And all he could see was Floyd drinking down his passion, staring at him with the full intensity of his gaze.

“Oh, fuck,” he whispered, trying to catch his breath as Alan's mouth slipped off his cock, his shudders subsiding as his body sank back to the couch.

Time to return the favor, and though it made him almost shift with guilt, he knew exactly what he was going to see when he made this offer. Not that Alan ought to care – he was getting the best side-effect of these thoughts.

“Get on up,” Greyson patted his chest.

Alan's eyes widened, but he wasted no time crawling up until he straddled Greyson's shoulders, one knee just about slipping off the edge of the couch. He unzipped himself, pulling out his dick along the way.

It was hard already, which made Greyson grin. Alan liked giving head, then. Or he'd been fiddling with himself the whole time, which was the same difference.

What would Floyd look like, naked? Did he have tattoos up along his stomach and chest and shoulders? Would he be moaning already, quietly, like Alan was?

Alan was slender enough and easy to haul closer so he could suck that cock at just the right angle, swallowing the warm, firm length until it almost hit the back of his throat before bobbing his head back again. Even at this angle, he wasn't big enough to choke him, so Greyson was free to let his imagination wander.

He sucked eagerly, not easily able to see Alan's face from this angle and also not particularly caring. When Alan warned him he was close, he ignored it, though. Like Alan, he was gonna swallow.

Alan's cock swelled and then released in quick, sticky loads that hit the back of his throat as his whole body shuddered. He nearly lost his balance and Greyson grabbed his hip to keep him steady.

“Oh, fuck... yes!”

When Alan went still, Greyson pulled back a little, then let him scoot backward on his knees until he could zip up again.

“That was good,” Alan breathed out.

“Oh, yeah.” Greyson couldn't help but grin. *Not for the reasons you think, but... it was awesome.* Now he knew he was officially lusting after his ex-partner. He just had to figure out how to chase him.

The oddest part, though, was how cool Alan seemed to be now that

the blowjobs were over. It wasn't like Greyson expected cuddles by the fireplace, but he was acting almost... snobby? He looked like he was waiting for Greyson to thank him.

Greyson's heart sank. Alan thought Greyson should be grateful for this.

Fuck that. Alan got just as much out of it as him.

"That was cool," Greyson concluded, zipping up as he stood up. "See you at work, a'ight?" he drawled, keeping it low-key.

Alan looked surprised, then a little miffed. "Yeah. Sure."

Greyson sauntered to the door. "See you." He didn't look back as he let himself out, striding down the sidewalk to the car.

For a moment, he almost felt bad. Maybe he'd misread that. Then, he reminded himself of his number one rule: *always trust your gut instinct*.

Greyson wasn't damaged goods, and he was never going to act like he was.

---

Just before he reached the house, a text message buzzed in his pocket, so Greyson dug out his phone. His eyebrows rose a few moments later.

Oh.

*Hey, it's Floyd. I have preliminary sketches done, can you email me pics tonight of designs and styles you like?*

Greyson's cheeks flushed. He waited until he was in the house to answer – until he kicked off his shoes and grabbed his laptop. Then, he responded.

*Yeah sure! I'll email them tonight.*

A few moments later, he got a response.

*Awesome.* Floyd sent his email address, which was the same as always.

It took him a little while on Google and different tattoo forums to collect photos that he liked – especially of the kinds of scenery he wanted. He really wanted one with the Rockies, since he'd grown exceptionally fond of the landscape out in Alberta. On the other arm, he could have Atlantic Canadian scenery.

And the angel wings... well, it was a stereotype, but in dotwork and greyscale it at least wouldn't look the same as every other goddamn

angel wing tattoo out there. That would also leave him room to tattoo around in the blank spaces and get them filled in sometime, if he wanted to make them more like conventional sleeves.

He attached all the photos to his email, then addressed it to Floyd.

*That* was an email he hadn't used in years. His new email account didn't even recognize it.

It was a hard decision on what to type in his message, but Greyson finally settled on:

*Here are some photos. Thanks, man. It was good to see you yesterday.*

He pressed send, a shiver of anxiety crawling down his spine. He tried to brush it off, instead grabbing the TV remote while he kept the laptop open all evening. Just in case.

By the time Greyson went to bed, he hadn't gotten a response.

*At least we're probably still on for Friday*, he thought as he shut everything down for the night. At least, he hoped he hadn't screwed anything up by hinting at that moment between them.

That moment he'd so loved.

Floyd

A badge on his Grindr icon alerted Floyd to another new message. He just hoped it wasn't some twink pissed off at him for ignoring his messages.

Luckily, it wasn't... but a moment after reading it, Floyd realized he would have preferred that.

It was a message from the blank profile he'd spotted earlier.

And worse yet, it said, *I think you know me.*

"Fuck," Floyd whispered. It wasn't the first time he'd gotten that message – the community was damn small enough, after all – but it was the first time from a faceless profile. That made it a lot creepier.

He rubbed his chin, looking at the guy's profile again before going back to the message. It seemed like the opening to a horror movie if he didn't answer.

*Were we in school together?* he guessed. Half the awkward Grindr interactions he'd ever had in this city were from former schoolmates. The answer was almost immediate.

*Yeah lol.*

Floyd narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

*Ok then who are you?*

There was no answer just yet, and not for a few minutes.

Floyd tried not to let his imagination run away with him as he leaned back, not even bothering looking at the other guys nearby. He just left that message chain open until another message came through.

*I'll see you at the reunion soon anyway lol you single?*

Floyd raised his eyebrows. It was on his damn profile that he was, but why was this guy worried about it? Was he looking for someone to go with, too? That could be a convenient excuse, if he knew who the guy was.

Who was gay in his year that he didn't already know about? He rubbed his chin, trying to cast his mind back through soccer players, hockey stars, quiet nerds, emos, punks...

It could be anyone.

*Yeah*, Floyd answered simply.

Then, his heart sank as the obvious occurred to him. It could be Brett.

The asshole had tried to message on Facebook a couple months ago and had talked about the reunion then, too.

Floyd had called Alex, the private detective, for help making sure Brett wasn't stalking him. But before going through with it, he'd backed out to deal with it himself.

He didn't want anyone knowing about that.

But now... if he was back...

This would make a hell of a lot of sense, given that the other guy didn't seem to want to show his face or name.

*Did we date?* Floyd asked next, staring at the Grindr message chain. He waited for longer than he had for the last message and still nothing came through.

He flicked back to Brett's Facebook message on his laptop, taking a minute to find the conversation. He'd blocked the guy after getting the message, but he still had it around, just in case.

*Hey man how are you. Coming into Freddy for the reunion we should meet up lol.*

That was all he'd said, but that was enough to raise Floyd's hackles. The little asshole, thinking he wanted him around again after all that had happened.

But Floyd was older now. He could look after himself, and he wasn't so blinded by Brett's supposed love for him. He wasn't that weak anymore.

Floyd's phone went off and he checked the conversation. His stomach lurched at the response.

*ya.*

He put down his phone for a minute, trying to come up with some response that was more eloquent than just *fuck off*. "No, that's enough," he muttered under his breath a moment later and went back



to his profile.

It was gone.

“What the--”

Brett had deleted his fucking profile. Of course he had.

“What a fuckin' creepy skeevy asshole,” Floyd muttered under his breath. Then again, Brett always had been. Alex couldn't help him if the guy just wanted to creep him out anyway.

Then there was the irony of reconnecting with both Greyson and Brett at the same time. And what a cruel fuckin' irony *that* was.

But Floyd was pissed this time. He'd had years to get ready for this. He wasn't going to let *anyone* tell him who or what to do.

## Greyson

“Okay, good enough.” As Greyson studied himself in the bathroom mirror, he let his chest push forward. He stood in the attention-grabbing pose of a guy who knew exactly how to handle the situation, even if he didn't.

He looked *more* than good enough.

But he was in a short-sleeved shirt, the arms stretching tight around his biceps. It showed off his forearms, which he knew was a good thing in general, but also his inner arms.

What a bizarre contrast that was. He was tired of being self-conscious, even if he'd been dealing with it for years. Realistically, it wasn't like *everyone* noticed, his muscles and hair doing enough to hide the marks many times, but sometimes it felt like they would.

Greyson shoved his phone and wallet into his pockets, then checked for his keys before striding out of the house. He decided to walk instead of taking the car, needing the exercise to cool his nerves.

This was his first time seeing Floyd since that drunken kiss, and he just prayed Floyd didn't have to be wasted again to look him in the eye. If he'd fucked something up between them, he was going to regret it.

When he approached the shop a minute or two before he was due, he slowed his pace to walk the last few blocks so he'd get there right on time.

The door jangled as he pushed it open.

“Hey,” Floyd greeted immediately from behind the counter, ducking out from behind it to approach him. “You made it.”

Greyson half-expected a hug or a handshake or something, but Floyd stepped around him to flip the sign to “closed” and turn the lock on the door.

“Oh... Hey. You're – am I on time...?”

Floyd laughed. “Yeah. I just can't take on any new customers if I'm

working on you, and I'd rather not. I often close for my evening appointment."

"Oh." Greyson felt a bit sheepish for what he'd been starting to think. He cleared his throat, then wandered up to the counter.

Floyd cut him a sideways glance. "Ready to go over everything? Come through to the back."

That night hadn't been the end of their chemistry, then. As Floyd brushed past him, bare arms touched, and he saw Floyd straighten up a little at the same moment as a shiver rushed down Greyson's spine.

He followed into the back room again. "No Chase?"

"Nah, I close the shop today."

"Cool." Greyson sprawled on the chair, knees apart, trying to sit sideways while Floyd pushed his chrome-legged rolling stool closer and sat on it, opening up his book.

"Oh, wow."

The designs were *gorgeous*. The intricate dots laced around each other, forming individual feathers from the elbow out. The feathers were grouped along his arm in a way that looked just like wings. The best part, though, was the sketch of mountain scenery. A crisp lake sat in a pool at the bottom of the mountain, with one tree branch cutting across the field of vision just like a photograph. And it looked like that could go over the deepest scar.

"That's..." Greyson looked over at the other arm. The design was quite similar, only the feathers were thicker and more tufty, looking almost three-dimensional. He actually touched them just to make sure they weren't, and Floyd laughed. "I wanted to check!"

"You like that one more?"

"I... think I prefer the first one."

"Mmm." Floyd nodded, obviously making a mental note of that. "And that scenery?"

It was a rocky cliff, but unmistakably Atlantic Canadian: short, stout trees and a lighthouse in the background.

"Beautiful," Greyson approved, looking up at Floyd.

Oh, shit, he was close. They weren't even a foot apart, and Floyd's eyes were fixed on his expressions.

"Thanks," Floyd said, his voice quiet. "I was hoping you'd like them. You can be honest, though, if there's anything you want me to change."

"No." Greyson really meant it. He hadn't expected the art to come *that* quickly, or to be that... well... artistic. Floyd was incredible.

He just couldn't imagine it on his own skin.

"So," Floyd abruptly said, uncapping his pen, "what was up with that kiss?"

Greyson's jaw dropped, and then he laughed under his breath. "You started it."

"No, you did."

"We both probably did," Greyson snorted as Floyd started to grin. "cause we were both... pretty into it."

Floyd shared a laugh with him, then rolled closer. "Lie down on the chair."

Greyson shifted and stretched out his legs, then laid his arm along the armrest. "Like this?"

"Perfect." Floyd's hand touched his arm, turning it this way and that as he examined his sketchbook. He spoke with a flatter tone to his voice, as if most of his concentration was going into the art, but his eyes were alert when they flicked up to Greyson's. "Didn't know you were gay back then. Why'd you come out now?"

"I didn't know 'til Alberta," Greyson murmured, keeping his voice down even though nobody else was around the shop. All his anxiety about meeting up with Floyd again, about what he might say or about the tension that might be between them... It was all gone. He relaxed under Floyd's touch and his deep, steady voice. "So I'm not exactly closeted here. I just haven't told people yet."

"Mmm. So, what do you think about the lake across these ones, with this tree branch – and those cliffs across here?"

"That was what I figured you'd do. It looked great on the paper."

"Hold still." Floyd flipped his arm over until the back of his hand pressed the arm rest, rolling closer and sketching in quick, certain motions with his fine-tipped pen. Line by line, he outlined the art with breathtaking precision.

Though Greyson's stomach naturally knotted when the pen went

across his scars, it didn't seem to stop it. "Will the ink hold differently...?"

"It sometimes does. I've tattooed over worse and they do bleed a little, but you can touch up areas," Floyd told him. "It's free. Speaking of which..."

Greyson laughed quietly. "I know it's gonna be expensive. I looked up your rate."

"Perfect," Floyd nodded. "I'm thinking about twenty hours per arm."

"Okay." Greyson had been expecting a little longer, actually. "You must be fast."

"This is my preferred style." Bit by bit, the landscape flowed up Greyson's arm, and he was fascinated by the progression of black ink. "I'm slower at other styles. That's why we always have complementary artists at the shop."

"Mmm. I'm lucky I like your style, then," Greyson said. He shivered at each brush of Floyd's fingers along his arm, even if they were strictly professional.

Floyd's eyes flickered to him for a moment before he smiled. "I'm glad, too. How does that look?"

"That's perfect."

"Now I'll do the angel wings. More like this than that, yeah?"

"Yeah. Maybe with a couple more feathers..."

Floyd watched attentively as he pointed out the changes he wanted made, and he was quick to translate them to Greyson's skin. The marker almost tickled as he drew along the inner arm.

"I'll have to shave your arms first, before I can do the upper parts, though." Floyd was already rolling away to grab a razor.

"No problem," Greyson told him. "Now?"

"Yep. By the way – does tomorrow morning still work for you to start the tattooing? It's going to take a while to get all these details worked out. The ink lasts a couple days if we need to book next week."

"Yeah, that's perfect. Oh, how about something a little higher – yeah, right there," Greyson smiled as Floyd's pen worked across his skin. "Jesus, you're fast."

"I've done it for a while," Floyd dryly responded with a grin. "You're

still fast with handcuffs, I bet.”

“Right. Sorry,” Greyson laughed. That *hadn't* been meant as innuendo, he was sure. Had it...?

They chatted lightly over the next few minutes as Greyson turned his arm this way and that to let Floyd shave off the hairs of his arms. Floyd's touch was firm, and the feeling of the razor sliding smoothly across his skin made him catch his breath with how surprisingly erotic it was.

It was so much trust to place in him, but he didn't doubt Floyd for a second.

Once his arms were smooth enough, Floyd resumed drawing, his marker working quickly.

Still, the last half-hour had done nothing to dispel Greyson's yearning for Floyd's touch, and it was only getting harder to restrain his impulses. Being close to Floyd for long enough to talk to him was bad enough, but minutes upon minutes of Floyd turning his arms around, holding them down, drawing on him, the grazes of fingers along his skin...

It was all he could do not to get hard.

Finally, Floyd murmured, “Check that out. I'll get you a mirror.”

Greyson was stunned at even the line art on his skin. It was like nothing he'd ever seen. He couldn't have pictured it before he saw it, but now that he had, it just looked *good* on him. “Wow.”

“You'll carry them very well,” Floyd nodded. “You have the right build for this style of sleeve.”

“Guess so,” Greyson grinned, turning his arms this way and that to see himself with the line art. “Yeah, that's – all of that is what I want.”

“No changes?”

“None,” Greyson told him, finally tearing his eyes off the mirror as Floyd set it aside and sat down again. “So, tomorrow morning we start the line art?”

Floyd nodded, peeling off his gloves and throwing out the marker. “And you'll want to wash your sheets tonight to promote better healing.”

Greyson slowly sat up. “Okay. Better get laid tonight, then.”

Floyd, who had been tensing up to roll away, froze and gazed at him levelly. Greyson saw the heat flush through his cheeks in a red wave, and then Floyd's lips parted to say something.

Greyson swung his legs over the edge of the chair until their legs touched.

Floyd's eyes darkened, and he wordlessly leaned in.

Greyson grabbed him by the cheeks to haul him closer and they were kissing, both rising to their feet and stumbling against each other as they kissed hard. Those warm hands which had so patiently worked over his skin for minutes on end now clutched at his shoulders and grabbed the front of his shirt, hauling him even closer.

Floyd was solid and warm against his front, his lips soft but his cock hard. It pressed against Greyson even through layers of denim, and Greyson *burned* to feel it without anything in the way.

Hands already ran up bodies, each of them taking a moment to feel up each other's builds. God, Floyd was even fitter now than he had been back then – his biceps properly filled out, his chest a solid mass of muscle, his stomach tight and rippling...

But was that strength all outward, or was it core?

Fucking was a great way to find out.

Greyson hungrily pushed against Floyd, grinding into his hip as they gasped for breath into each other's mouths, already half-tearing each other's shirts off.

"Wait," Floyd whispered, which made Greyson's heart lurch. But Floyd sure as hell wasn't pushing him back – his hands were on Greyson's hips, pulling him close. "Come home with me. If we're gonna do this, it's at my place, not here."

Greyson jerkily nodded. "All right."

"Just think of the sanitization."

That startled a laugh out of Greyson, and then he was laughing louder than he had, in longer than he could remember, stumbling against Floyd before he straightened up.

He was grinning freely, too, his eyes lighting up with joy. Going home with this man? Oh, *fuck*, yes.

"I'll be out in three minutes. I just have to clean up in here and set the alarm. Don't fuckin' go anywhere," Floyd warned as Greyson pulled

away for the door.

“Aye aye, sir,” Greyson winked. He fumbled with the handle until he got out into the hall, then made his way through the front and waited on the sidewalk outside.

Greyson's heart still pounded with the memory of that hot, hard body pressing against his, claiming every bit of pleasure that he could give. And soon, he was going to have a lot more to remember than that.

His arms were inked up, his cock was on fire, and his mind was blown. Never in a thousand years had he imagined they would *actually* fuck, but this man was taking him home.

For the first time in a long time, as he waited on the sidewalk, Greyson couldn't *wait* for his partner for tonight to join him.



Floyd

Greyson looked hot lounging outside the shop waiting for him to lock up, hot leaning against the car door waiting to be let in, and hot sprawled back in his passenger seat.

Floyd was just fucking *into* him, no matter what.

Then there were Greyson's beautiful eyes. They so seriously met his whenever Greyson talked about what he'd gone through. He used blunt, quick words that definitely didn't cover the extent of what he'd seen and done in the last few years. Those eyes had been fixed on him for that entire art session, watching him so hard Floyd's dick had started to hurt.

Was it any wonder he could hardly control himself around the man?

There was something about his smile, and the way he watched him, and even the way he spoke – full of authority, but tentative under that. Some part of him was... always asking for permission, like he knew what he was doing at work but he was totally out in left field here.

It wasn't like Greyson *actually* didn't know what he was doing. Not with the way he kissed. Floyd wondered if those scars ran deeper than they seemed. Maybe he didn't think of himself anywhere *near* as hot as he came off.

They almost fell into Floyd's apartment, already kissing before they closed the door.

“Jesus,” Greyson whispered, his voice hoarse and a little strung out as he grabbed Floyd's shoulders to keep himself from tripping.

Floyd grinned, guiding him through the entryway. He kicked his shoes off and waited for Greyson to do the same, then pulled him close with one quick yank to grind together again.

“Which way's your room?”

“That way.” Floyd grabbed Greyson's ass, then laughed at his expression of surprised arousal and pulled him along toward it.

Greyson pushed the door shut after them both, then grabbed Floyd's cheeks to pull him in again for a long, filthy kiss. They pressed each other up against the bedroom door and Floyd let Greyson flatten him against it to give a few quick, suggestive thrusts of their hips together and let their cocks get hard again.

He was about ready to fuckin' come in his pants, but there was no way could he let himself do that.

Not until he'd had a taste of Greyson in all his ripped glory.

They wasted no time pulling each other's shirts off, biting at ears and necks and kissing at their lips between garments. When they were both shirtless, Floyd pulled Greyson in again so their nipples lightly brushed, circling his hips in slow, certain grinding moves as he pressed gentle, teasing open-mouthed kisses against the side of his neck.

"Oh, fuck," Greyson moaned. "You'd better not be a tease."

"I'm not," Floyd breathed out, cocky despite being pinned against the door. "Cause I follow through."

Greyson pulled Floyd over to the bed, giving them both a chance to look at each other as they crashed onto the bed together.

"You're fuckin' ripped now," Floyd whispered, his eyes wandering around those inked-up biceps and forearms, then down his chest and stomach. He made himself drag his gaze back up to his face.

Greyson gave an arrogant little grin and wink. "I know."

Floyd snorted with laughter, rolling Greyson onto his back and straddling him. He started attacking Greyson's chest and neck with kisses to melt that attitude. "Cheeky little fucker."

Greyson easily yielded, moaning and pushing up into Floyd's lips with each sucking kiss or nip against bare skin. His skin was soft and hot and tasted just like Floyd had imagined: musk and salt and... that unmistakable smell of *him*.

Floyd hadn't realized he'd missed Greyson's scent.

He licked up along Greyson's collarbone, then to the side of his neck. "Better not leave any marks if you're getting done tomorrow."

"Guess not," Greyson agreed, smirking. "What a shame."

Floyd nipped instead, a little sharper.

“Hnnh!” Greyson's nails bit into Floyd's shoulder, then scraped down his back as he hauled him up the bed to kiss his lips again.

Just *this* was intense – lips on lips, with soft, panting breaths against each other's mouths. They kept their eyes half-closed as if each was afraid to look the other straight in the eye.

This was going to be the hottest sex he'd had in *years*.

“Don't be freaked out if you see scars, yeah?”

Floyd snorted. “Course not,” he assured Greyson with a shrug. “Don't be freaked out by my tats.”

“Yeah,” Greyson laughed. “What, you got one on your ass?”

“Smart-ass.” Floyd smirked.

“It is a smart-ass. You got one?”

Greyson wrestled him a little, grabbing his biceps and heaving his body up against his to roll them over and pin Floyd down to the bed. Floyd gasped but let him, his adrenaline rushing at the sudden twist. Cool sheets made him shiver, but so did the hot mouth pressing a line down from the side of his neck to his nipple.

Floyd bit back his whimper of pleasure at the slow, dragging tease of a tongue around his nipple. Greyson knew how to use his mouth, then, the fucking sexy man. Floyd had to bite his lip hard to keep the sounds back, and even then, scattered ones slipped out.

“Hnn-nnh...” He squirmed, then raised a hand to his mouth to bite the side of his hand.

“Let me hear it,” Greyson ordered hoarsely, his breath hot against the throbbing skin.

With great reluctance, Floyd let his hand fall away and tucked it behind his own head instead, then cried out at the first slow swipe of a tongue across the aching flesh.

The nub of skin seemed to connect straight to his cock, which was pulsing and throbbing with need in his pants. It was trapped and desperate for touch – or better yet, those gorgeous lips. Fuck, it almost hurt!

Floyd bit back another moan, then dug his nails into his palm hard when lips closed around his nipple and Greyson finally sucked it into his mouth.

“Oh, fuck. Fuck,” he panted, his cheeks flushing with heat. Greyson had already found his weak spots, and they hadn't been on the bed more than three minutes.

Greyson chuckled deeply, apparently amused by his own discovery as he slowly let it pop out of his mouth, then sucked a few more times before kissing his way so slowly to the other nipple.

“I swear to God--” Floyd panted, gritting his teeth to resist the urge to haul Greyson's head over to the other nipple.

“Patience,” Greyson teased, which *nearly* snapped Floyd's nerves. But he relented, his tongue swiping across the other nipple in rapid little flicks before he sucked that into his mouth, too.

Again, Floyd's cock throbbed, his other nipple still aching for more attention, too.

“I'll show *you* patience,” Floyd whispered. “Hah!” Greyson had sucked it hard, making his head roll back and his spine arch off the bed again.

When he flopped down again, the last tingles from that intense burst of pleasure diffusing through his body, he was out of patience. He wrestled Greyson right back over again, grabbing his head to pin him to the pillow and kiss him hard – once, twice, three times...

Greyson gasped into his mouth, clutching him by the ass and grinding against him as he kissed back with teeth and tongue.

Floyd didn't let him have this pleasure for long. He wanted to tease every bit of a reaction out of Greyson in return. He yanked himself down and away, kissing along his neck to his ear, then behind it. A tongue along the lobe proved that Greyson's ears were sensitive, his skin twitching in a beautiful series of light ripples.

He flicked his tongue a few times, then dragged it all the way down to Greyson's collarbone.

“You're no better,” Greyson grumbled.

Floyd smirked. “Patience,” he mocked, kissing right above Greyson's nipple. “Good things come to those who-- nnh!” Greyson pushed his head down a little more to make him kiss his nipple. He burst out laughing, and so did Greyson. The laughter rippled through them both in an outbreak of pure joy, bizarrely out of place and yet perfect in that moment.

Then, he slapped Greyson's hand away, still laughing as he kissed the nipple properly a few times and flicked it with his tongue until he

could suck it.

He kept on going, though, kissing down along his stomach as he pulled open Greyson's jeans to get him naked. On his chest and thighs, he found a few more scars – some looking like his wrists, others not self-inflicted at all. Wherever he found one, he kissed it.

"I'm gonna suck your cock," he breathed out, looking up Greyson's body.

Greyson's cheeks were flushed a beautiful red, and he didn't seem to know how to answer. He was still looking stunned. "Uh huh."

Floyd cracked a grin. "Finally, you're speechless."

"Shut up."

"Ah, well. Almost," Floyd mournfully shrugged, yanking his underwear and jeans down as he scooted down the bed.

Greyson's cock sprang free, straight and flushed red, already clearly desperate for attention. Floyd was more than happy to give it to him once he'd fought the last of the clothes off Greyson's ankles.

First, though, he unbuttoned his own jeans and pulled them down enough to get his own cock out into the open. At least he could grind against Greyson a little.

"Hot," Greyson whispered, reaching down to stroke himself a few times as he looked Floyd up and down properly.

Floyd flushed with embarrassed pride, knowing Greyson's eyes were lingering on his tattoos. He paused long enough to give him a good view of them, then scooted back up the bed to replace Greyson's hand with his own around the base of the shaft.

Then, he kissed up the length to the very tip, kissed that, and let his lips smoothly part and slide around it and down.

"Hnnnh." Greyson's eyes slid closed as he rolled his head back. "Yeah...!"

Floyd loved seeing him in speechless pleasure, as much as he teased. He'd imagined his old partner now and then, in moments of guilty pleasure – once in the department men's bathroom, in a *really* desperate moment on a long shift.

But in person, hot and solid and writhing under him with need?

Fucking *incredible*.

He only got to suck that thick, swollen manhood into his mouth a few more times before Greyson gasped and pushed his head. "Don't – I wanna fuck you."

Floyd was flexible. For Greyson, he was *very* flexible. "Fuck, yeah," he whispered once he pulled his mouth off that wet, throbbing cock, looking up the length of Greyson's bare, tattooless skin. So much canvas he itched to work on.

"Get your ass up here."

Floyd grinned and scooted up the bed, then very deliberately rolled onto his front, burying his face in the pillow.

Just as he'd thought, Greyson couldn't resist. He was already on top of him, his weight blanketing Floyd from behind as he fumbled with his jeans to pull them down around his thighs.

"Oh, Christ, you're the hottest..." Greyson trailed off, seemingly wordless again. Was Floyd's blowjob game really *that* good?

Floyd grinned. "Thanks," he mumbled into the pillow, twisting so he could see behind him. Greyson was looking around, clearly in search of lubricant. Floyd spared him and leaned over to grab it for him.

Then, Greyson rummaged in his pocket and his wallet until he found a condom and tossed his jeans aside again, his dark eyes raking up and down Floyd's body. He grabbed the lubricant before Floyd could, and Floyd gasped.

"I want to do that."

Floyd's cheeks burned, but he nodded. Moments later, slick fingers pressed at his entrance and he moaned, pressing slowly up into them. "Y-Yes...!"

Greyson's fingers were thin and strong; rough, but not sharp. His touch was as careful as it was firm, and Floyd's resistance melted under the firm pressure.

Holy shit, this was a whole new tease.

The fingers in him were too thin compared to what he *really* wanted to be filled with, but he could barely moan his protest with how well they moved in him. In fact, Greyson was deliberately rubbing--

"Oh!" Floyd moaned, bucking up against Greyson's other hand on his lower back. "Oh, *fuck*." He'd found his prostate, and he was rubbing it like he wanted Floyd to come right now. "Christ, not that soon...!"

Greyson chuckled deeply. "I didn't know you were already on-edge." He lightened his touch, still rubbing for a minute more until Floyd's head spun.

*"Please."*

"Oh, yeah," Greyson whispered, pulling his fingers out.

Floyd pressed his face into his arm for a few moments to try to regain his composure, his whole world still spinning. How the fuck did Greyson get so good at fingering him? More importantly, was he going to be even better fucking him?

He had mere seconds before he found out.

The condom packet wrinkled from near his hip, and then Greyson's thick tip was pressing against his opening. Greyson tugged his jeans a little further down to make sure he had all the room he needed. The tight restriction of the fabric around Floyd's thighs kept his legs together, making it an even tighter squeeze.

Floyd was being filled suddenly, all warmth and hardness sliding into him as he curled his hands hard into the bedspread. Greyson's weight blanketed him, his solid muscles keeping him pressed in place, and the feeling of hot skin on skin was divine.

Christ, he loved being fucked.

Floyd dug his knees into the bed and pressed his fingertips into the bedspread, then bit the pillow. "Hnnh!"

Greyson's cock was filling him from top to bottom, the hot hardness making his mind spin. His already-hard cock throbbed with added pleasure of a type nothing else could imitate.

"That's it," Greyson roughly whispered into his ear, and then lips were pressing behind his ear, a tongue lapping at that sensitive spot...

Floyd whimpered sharply when Greyson found the spot where all the nerves seemed to converge, making his body pulse with added pleasure and heat. The sheets were trapping his body heat beneath him, his body burning with fiery passion already.

Greyson rode him hard, plunging deep into him with each firm thrust of his hips. Floyd felt Greyson's thigh muscles ripple against his, and even the hitching breaths of his heaving chest. For his part, Floyd couldn't even get a hand under himself, but his cock was grinding against the silken sheets with almost enough pressure to get him off with that alone...

But that wasn't all. The head of that cock plunged past his prostate over and over, squeezing his pleasure out of him and sending hard jolts of need through his whole body.

"Yes!" Floyd moaned into the blankets, and Greyson's teeth closed around the back of his neck to nip for a moment before he kissed to the other side of his ear and licked along the rim.

The teasing-light, sensitive brushes of wet tongue against his skin made a sharp contrast to the fast, deep, endlessly satisfying pace Greyson set to fuck him, their hips driving together in sharp, pleasure-filled slaps.

"Yes, *please*... oh, God, yes," Floyd moaned, his mind spinning. He could almost forget that it was Greyson, his former partner, maybe one-time enemy, long-time friend...

Except that Greyson's scent was all around him, that distinct musk alongside the sharp smell of sex and sweat. Greyson's mouth was unmistakable in the way it moved across his skin, leaving twitching, tingling nerves in its wake. Greyson's eyes bored into him from behind. Whenever Greyson took a pause from kissing him and pulled back even a little, Floyd only had to turn his head to the side to see the sharp way Greyson watched him.

"Yes...!"

That was Greyson, his voice a rough growl that sent chills of need through Floyd. The deep tone made Floyd's breath catch in his throat.

"Oh, *fucking hell*, Floyd, you're so much better... than I ever-- ah...!"

Whatever Greyson had been about to say, it was cut off by the short, sharp cry of a man in utter ecstasy. Floyd twisted his head around enough to watch Greyson's expression tauten and squeeze with pleasure as his mouth opened to gasp for breath.

That huge, swollen cock pounded him deeply a few more times with the sharp, jerky, desperate movements of Greyson's hips. Then, Greyson pulled out and back, his weight lifting off Floyd.

Already, Floyd missed being pinned to the bed by him, and he missed the cock in him.

But Greyson didn't make him wait for long, rolling him onto his back and scooting further down the bed to kiss along his stomach and thigh.

"Jesus!" Floyd yelped at how damn *sensitive* he was. His cock had been



going entirely without attention for way too long now, and he was about ready to come at a single kiss.

"Hnnh-- nnh, yes..." Floyd panted, quickly tangling his hands in Greyson's hair. "Yes, please... fuck, yes..." He almost thrust into Greyson's mouth, but Greyson's hand on his hip kept him firmly pinned to the bed still.

The wet, tight warmth of suction around the tip of his cock slid further down and Floyd groaned utterly senselessly with half-formed words of pleasure and approval and *need*.

Greyson sucked him off as the sparks of desire burst under his skin, and then everything narrowed to his focus on those beautiful, wide lips around his cock, the eager eyes on his own, and the wet warmth of that skilled tongue swiping around and along his frenulum.

"Yes...!" Floyd went off almost like a shot with no warning even for himself, his gasp at once horrified and apologetic, yet utterly thrilled. He tried to push Greyson back in the scarce seconds of warning he had, but Greyson wouldn't let him.

"Mmm," Greyson moaned encouragement instead, tightening his suction around the head as Floyd's passion spilled forth in hard, fast jolts of pleasure.

"G-Greyson, yes," was all Floyd could manage in a mumbled moan, his whole body convulsing with pleasure as his stomach tightened and his arms and legs twitched, and above all, the heat in his body still burned.

*Greyson is the hottest man I've ever, **ever** fucked.*

Even when Greyson pulled back from his softened cock, Floyd felt himself come down slowly as if he were still half on clouds. He could barely put three words together, his lips parted as he stared at Greyson.

"Well, you're easy to tucker out," Greyson murmured at last, grinning as he scooted back up to flop on his side next to Floyd.

Floyd rolled his eyes and turned onto his side to face Greyson. Once he kicked his jeans off to get naked, he reached out tentatively to rest his hand on Greyson's hip. That seemed like a safe bet. "J-Just takes me a minute, is all. After a great orgasm." And Christ, that *had* been.

"I'll accept that compliment," Greyson murmured, reaching around for a cheeky slap on Floyd's ass.

“Hey,” Floyd laughed, his wits slowly recovering. Greyson was the hottest man he'd ever been with, but he had no idea if this was some stupid one-time thing or not. Maybe Greyson had just been unable to resist temptation, like him. Maybe he had... other plans.

Floyd hoped not.

“You can stay overnight,” Floyd murmured, wiping his forehead and shifting where he lay so his limbs were more comfortable. He didn't care if he had to wash the bedding tomorrow morning.

“Nah,” Greyson murmured, a pink flush rising up his cheeks. He was pretty hard to embarrass, but somehow, Floyd had managed it. He didn't quite know how. “I'll see you in the morning anyway, pretty early on. First, I have a couple things to do. Laundry, for one.”

“Right. Your sheets.” The thought of doing laundry at the same time as Greyson in another household made Floyd smile to himself. “Good man. Follow the care instructions.”

“I will,” Greyson agreed. There was a moment where they lay next to each other still, hands on each other's hips, eyes on each other, lips still parted as they caught their breath.

Then Greyson rolled up and away, pushing himself to his feet while Floyd closed his eyes to let him clean up and dress.

Floyd tried to get up to see him out, but Greyson shook his head. “I'll see myself out, it's all right.”

Privately, Floyd was relieved to skip the weird moment that always happened at the door. He pushed himself up onto his elbow instead and nodded casually. “Cool.”

“Yeah... cool.” Greyson, now dressed and pulling his belt through the last loop, paused and gazed at him, then nodded sharply. “See you tomorrow, still, yeah?”

Floyd nodded. *For hours. God, I shouldn't have started mixing business and pleasure.* But whatever. Floyd was too pleasantly exhausted to think about tomorrow yet.

He listened to Greyson leave the apartment and listened to the door click shut, then closed his eyes once he was sure it was secure.

Floyd wasted no time scrambling under the sheets, still remembering the weight of Greyson along his back and the thick, hot weight of Greyson inside him. If Floyd could've gotten hard again at the memory, he no doubt would have.

But just as much as the raw sensual details, he remembered the gentle touch of fingers along his spine and ribs, the gentle brush of lips against his ear...

Floyd was asleep within minutes.

## Greyson

Gravel crunched underfoot, squeaking against Greyson's shoes as he trotted down the lane toward the main road. The sun was barely up, even considering the summer hour, but anxious energy burned through Greyson and fueled him on.

He'd barely slept, but that was normal these days. Whether he slept for three hours or nine, he always woke with the crawling anxiety under his skin that *needed* release, and the healthiest way he knew to burn it off was by running.

So that morning, as most mornings, Greyson was out for a run. Unlike most of his class days, he pushed himself until his lungs burned. He didn't care if he had to fuel up extra to make up for it – he needed the burn of *doing* something that would keep him completely busy.

“Shit!” The word spilled from his lips as he backpedaled to a halt, his arms flailing. *He* had right of way at the crosswalk, but that didn't matter when some punk-ass kid in a Jeep didn't feel like stopping.

Greyson barely restrained the urge to flip the kid the middle finger as he roared through the crosswalk, but even more terrifying was the fact that the guy's eyes didn't even flicker his way. He hadn't even seen him.

“Asshole drivers in this asshole town,” Greyson exclaimed, his voice breathless and grating even to his own ears as he ran across the crosswalk to finish the last, and paved, loop of his run. Then he'd turn around to trace his steps back home.

At least he'd seen the guy in time. His adrenaline still pumped hard, his body utterly consumed by that feeling of being *alive*, miraculously.

It wasn't like he'd been grazed on the way by. There were still a few feet of room to spare – a little distance. Greyson knew he wouldn't have made it across the crosswalk in time, though, and that was terrifying.

Greyson made it home fine, though his heart still pumped even harder than it ought to have by the end of the run. His legs had that great burning, trembling, itching feeling that always meant he'd just had the

exact right length of run – not so long it hurt, but long enough to stretch him to his limits.

And as always, the first blast of hot shower water across the back of his neck was better than some orgasms.

Not the one last night, though.

Fuck, he still caught his breath even thinking about being pressed over and against Floyd's hot body, pounding him into the bed with single minded focus on making Floyd cry out his pleasure.

And had he ever. Floyd was noisy and squirmy in bed, perhaps kept a little more restrained by being half-dressed throughout their time in bed yesterday. Greyson really wanted him naked next time.

But more than that, he wanted to look into his eyes. Those brief glimpses of pleasure hadn't been enough for him. He wanted to see Floyd's ecstasy and joy and every moment of pleasure drawn across his face like a map.

Floyd was so damn easy to read. It was like he'd never been trained a day in the force, which... seemed like exactly what Floyd wanted, if he was so determined to ditch his old life. Not that Greyson could blame him for that.

“God,” Greyson mumbled, soaping up his hands to lather up his body. He avoided scrubbing his arms so as not to wipe away the ink. The sex had been so fucking hot, but there was so much more to think about. Floyd was an old friend, an old partner, and the guy who was going to have his hands on him for something like forty hours in the next month.

They had to look each other in the eye today.

That didn't stop Greyson's exhausted body from burning, the blood still rushing around a little too freely – and down to his cock. The shower water hit the growing erection and streamed down around it in a little curtain of rain along his foot.

Greyson leaned against the shower wall and closed a soapy hand around his cock. He washed himself in a few quick strokes and swipes, running his thumb around the head, then let his hand close tightly around the shaft and stroke to the base.

He jerked off quick and hard to memories of Floyd's hot, tattooed body sprawled across the bed under him. He could viscerally remember Floyd's delicious, throbbing cock in his mouth, and he licked his lips with the craving he felt for the velvety heat again. The

thick taste of Floyd's come was an echoed memory in the back of his throat. Then there were quick moments of his own fantasies: Floyd bending him in two to fuck him right back; Floyd's sure and certain hands running across his bare chest, pinching his nipples; Floyd's tongue licking into his mouth...

When Greyson came, he desperately tried to stifle his moan, but Floyd's name spilled over his lips anyway as he thrust his throbbing cock through his own tight fist.

He was almost dizzy from exertion and exhaustion by the time he was soft and he'd rinsed his cock and the shower clean. He stepped clear, toweling off and wrapping himself in the fluffy towel for a few moments to bask in those images again before he made himself forget them.

They hadn't even spent the night together, on Greyson's choice. Floyd might have woken up with regrets. Hell, he might not even want to acknowledge anything had happened. Greyson couldn't assume a damn thing yet.

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His belly full of scrambled eggs, toast, bacon, and more, Greyson's nerves were far more settled. A big breakfast after a run was the best reward, and the best way of fueling up his muscles again. Especially since he was going to have to be strong today. He didn't know how much pain to expect.

Behind the tattoo shop counter, instead of the six-foot-odd man he'd pressed into the bed last night, was Chase. Jackson's boyfriend, he remembered from that pub meeting.

"Oh, hey," Greyson greeted, trying not to sound surprised. Chase worked here; of course he'd be here.

"Hi," Chase smiled. "Good to see you."

"What, Floyd not around? You on duty instead?" Greyson asked casually, hoping his worries weren't revealed by the easygoing question.

"He had to run the deposit to the bank," Chase told him. "Don't worry, he's still around to do your session. Sounds like a long one ahead of you guys." Chase's eyes were already on the inked outlines Floyd had so carefully drawn on Greyson yesterday. "Ohhh, *that'll* be something."

Greyson smiled, pulling his t-shirt sleeves up over his shoulders to

show the tops of the designs. “Yeah, that's what I figured.”

“Oh, man, let me see that. He showed me the outlines, but holy crap, it looks even better in person. You're gonna love that.”

When Greyson approached and turned his arms this way and that for Chase to have a look, his stomach tensed – as usual. Chase didn't even seem to notice the scars, though. He must have been too busy following the contours of the outlines.

“It's not just outlined, is it?”

“No,” Greyson assured him, shaking his head. “I just want to get everything done in even stages. I have an event in a month.”

“Ahhh, right,” Chase nodded. “Makes sense. So you know him, too, huh? From old days at work? He never talks about being a cop.”

Greyson's mouth tightened and he leaned against the counter, looking out the door for Floyd instead of at Chase. “Yeah.”

Chase hesitated for a few moments and chose not to comment. Instead, he said, “I'm glad he's meeting old buddies. I think he needs 'em.”

“Yeah?” This was less dangerous turf, so Greyson looked over at Chase again. “He's got all of you guys, though, huh?”

Chase grinned. “Yeah, we hang out a lot. But he needs more friends outside the business, too. One of our mutual friends just moved to Toronto to play hockey and Floyd's been moping. Don't tell him I said that...”

The idea of Floyd moping made Greyson chuckle fondly. He'd never seen him mope for some non-serious reason, so... it sounded kind of amusing. “Right. Everyone needs friends,” he agreed. This was an awkward conversation at best, but Chase was trying.

“Speaking of which, you wanna come over for a barbecue next week? My boyfriend and his brothers liked hanging out with you too,” Chase shrugged.

“As long as you don't expect me to fill in for that other guy and play hockey.”

Chase laughed heartily. “No worries. I don't either. They tried to teach me and... it didn't go well for anyone. Even Noah's better.”

The door rattled and Greyson smiled as Floyd entered. “Hey,” Greyson nodded, then glanced back at Chase. “What day?”

“Thursday night? We usually barbecue on Thursdays. Come over anytime around supper.”

“Sounds great.”

When Greyson looked at Floyd again, Floyd's eyes were a little wide. It was like he couldn't believe Chase had made that offer. Then the look was gone and Floyd was smiling at him instead. “Hi.”

Greyson ignored the weird moment. “Hey,” he said again. “How's it going?”

“Pretty good. Ready to get started? I've got everything ready for you back there.”

“Good luck,” Chase smiled. “I'll leave you to it.” He reached out for a handshake, which Greyson gave him.

“Thanks.” Greyson pulled back from Chase to follow Floyd into the back room. His heart raced the moment they were left alone, though.

*No hiding from him now.*

“Take a seat and get your shirt off for me,” Floyd told him, and his voice was exactly as professional as it had been yesterday.

Greyson decided to try his luck. “Yes, *sir*.” He swung his leg over the other side of the tattoo chair and flopped onto it, yanking his t-shirt off by the back of the neck. “And my pants?”

This made Floyd burst out laughing. “I think I can keep those clean.”

“Damn,” Greyson winked, stretching his arms out along the armrests as Floyd brought over alcohol wipes.

“So it'll be about twenty hours per arm, like I said before,” Floyd refreshed his memory. “And I'm knocking the rate down to a hundred bucks an hour--”

“No, you don't have to,” Greyson tried to interrupt, but Floyd waved him off.

“--since I owe you a lot. Old friend discount.”

Greyson blinked a few times. *Is he saying what I think he's saying?* Greyson stayed quiet while Floyd sanitized his whole arm, then the other one. At last, Greyson cleared his throat. “So, about what you said...”

“You're not talking me out of the discount.”



Greyson sighed and rolled his eyes. "You've always been a stubborn ass. I know that. No, I mean... you owe me?"

"I do." Floyd didn't seem to mind discussing it when he had something to keep his hands and eyes busy, like readying the tattoo machine. "I appreciate what you did for me all those years ago. In retrospect more than I did then, of course. I left Brett not long afterward."

Greyson let out a long sigh of relief. "Thank God." He meant it, too. "I was worried about... you know."

Floyd half-smiled. "Yeah. But I still don't think you handled it the right way." He paused as he rolled closer now, making direct eye contact with him.

Greyson nodded without hesitation. "I know."

Again, Floyd seemed surprised, but this time not in an unpleasant way. He hesitated, then rolled the rest of the way over. "So, it'll feel like a lot of stinging and shit. You know the drill. Tell me when it gets too much so we can both take a break, yeah? Don't go all macho bullshit on me."

"I'm half macho bullshit and half coffee. You know me. And I've only had two coffees," Greyson complained, just to make Floyd smile. Floyd *did* know his tendency to push through pain – like when he twisted his shoulder taking down a burglar but finished his shift despite Floyd's nagging.

It worked; Floyd grinned and shoved him lightly before adjusting his gloves and lowering the tattoo machine.

The first few pricks *did* sting, mostly because it was a kind of pain Greyson really wasn't familiar with.

"Ooof."

"You all right?"

"Yeah, fine," Greyson instantly reassured him. It was an indescribable sensation, and it lit his skin up with nervous energy. Yet there was a primal part of him that felt rooted to the ground and oh so alive. It was a feeling he'd been missing for *months*.

*Oh, this is going to be the hardest thing I've ever done.*

"God, things have changed now," Floyd laughed quietly, his gloved fingers tracing over his bicep. It was hard to keep his arm still and relaxed under the touch, but Greyson did his best to keep his fingers loose and breathing steady.

“Yeah,” Greyson murmured. “I thought you'd hate me.”

“Nah. I never did,” Floyd shook his head. His eyes didn't flicker to Greyson's, though; he kept them firmly fixed on his work as he outlined with almost as much ease as he'd drawn yesterday. “I just resented that the department kept you safe.”

Greyson's skin crawled with remembrance. One drunk night, a slip of the tongue, and he'd found out that Brett was bullying Floyd around. Brett was known at the station for getting into fights and shit, so there was no love lost on Floyd's boyfriend.

So, fueled by drink and rage, Greyson had gone to fix that.

Only Floyd hadn't been grateful after all. He'd been angry – furious – that the department kept Greyson utterly sheltered from consequences. Not that Brett had had the guts to try to challenge the cops over the coverup.

But Floyd had been heartbroken that justice could be doled out in other ways by those who were supposed to enforce it. Perhaps more distressed about that, even, than what had originally prompted Greyson to defend him.

Christ, Greyson couldn't stand bullies.

Slowly, with murmurs of conversation about ordinary things – sports first, then past tattoos, interesting cases Greyson had worked, and local news, the lines filled in. They snaked down from his shoulders to his wrists, the stark black ink embedded in reddening, stinging skin.

They took a break a couple hours in to grab sandwiches and drinks, then kept going.

The whole time, though, neither Greyson nor Floyd breathed a word about what had happened last night. It was comfortable that way, but Greyson's stomach churned more and more as their five-hour session drew to a close.

Floyd's hands running up and down his arms for hours conjured up the most pleasant body memories under his skin. It was hard not to get hard at the memory of Floyd's hands running up his arms, those soft hands cupping his cheeks... those *divine* lips on his...

The outlines were almost finished when their time was up. With the shading and coloring Floyd still had to do, Greyson could see why this was going to take such a long time.

Greyson steeled his courage as he lay back to wait to be bandaged,

then turned his gaze to Floyd.

He had to know.

“This is kind of out of the blue now, but... do you want to go on a date? Or was last night... one time only?”

Floyd caught his breath in the middle of tearing off clear wrap, then finished ripping off the piece and rolled closer to wrap it around Greyson's forearm. “I... I wasn't expecting that,” he admitted. “Yeah. I'd like that.”

Greyson's shoulders sank slightly, and he offered a smile as the clear material clung to his skin before being taped up. “Cool. We'll text and work things out?”

“Yeah, sure.” Floyd was being casual, but it didn't sound like he was blowing him off. It was more like he was trying to stay deliberately cool – maybe because this was such an awkward place between client and friend and lover.

Greyson hoped he hadn't made the next few weeks of sessions really weird.

Floyd

“Jesus, that was intense.”

Floyd wiped down the tattoo chair absentmindedly, even though he'd done that twice already. Chase was leaning in the doorway watching him clean up after Greyson's session, and he could feel Chase's eyes boring into him.

“You look like you just had great sex,” Chase laughed.

Floyd's head snapped around to Chase. “What? At work? That would break a few laws, I think--”

Chase was watching him with raised eyebrows, his lips pursed and hip jutting out to lean on the door frame.

*Okay, now I'm acting weird and suspicious.* Heat crept up Floyd's neck and then his cheeks, and he quickly strode over to wipe down the counter and check his ink supplies. “Sorry. Just, you know, licensing.”

Chase nodded. “License renewal stressing you out?”

“Yeah.”

Chase hummed, and he didn't sound convinced.

Floyd fought the exasperated frustration in his chest. It wasn't like he was doing an awesome job lying anyway. “Okay, fine,” Floyd muttered. “I know I'm on edge lately. Sorry.”

“I was gonna say that,” Chase nodded. He leaned back to glance down the hall toward the door as if checking that the shop was clear, then looked back at Floyd. “So, do you need advice or something?”

Floyd moved automatically to rinse the needle and put it in the ultrasonic cleaner, then checked the tattoo machine. That was sterilized, so he took it out to start reassembling it. The whole time, his mind churned over the question. He wasn't sure he wanted to recount the whole story right now.

“Seriously, man,” Chase said, his voice quieter. “You helped me out before, when... you know.”

*When his family was stalking him. Creepy fuckers. "Right."*

"I'm not interrogating you, but if you wanna talk, you know where I am."

Floyd met Chase's concerned gaze, then nodded as he shook his hands dry and grabbed the mop. "Thanks. I will."

Chase gave in and smiled, then strode up to the front again as the front door jangled to announce a new customer's arrival.

Floyd's mind wandered as he cleaned his station and the whole floor. He wasn't really sure where all of his tension was coming from, if he thought about it. This thing he had with Greyson was probably the least stressful part of it. Brett getting in touch again was pretty high up there, though.

He'd advised Chase to get some kind of exercise or take up self-defense or karate... any sport to feel more confident and burn off his energy. Chase had gone for fencing, and even the way he moved now was more confident.

Not that Floyd had confidence issues anymore, but walking to work and back was all the exercise he did these days. Plus, if he could get even a little bigger before the reunion next month...

"I need to get back to the gym," Floyd muttered under his breath, speaking aloud to hold himself to his promise. His archery arms were going to vanish at this rate. And there was one big bonus: a certain someone who worked at the gym. He'd get to see Greyson even more. Floyd was suddenly even more motivated.

It was time to deal with his tension the easiest possible way. Well, second-easiest. With Greyson in such close proximity, the easiest might happen again, though.

Floyd shivered with pleasure at the thought.

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As he counted cash, Floyd glanced at his phone, which lay on the desk next to him.

Greyson had tipped him just right that afternoon, so he must have done his homework ahead of time. It felt weird to take money from him while flirting, but there was no chance in hell Greyson would let him discount his rate even more. Greyson had a lot more pride than was healthy.

His thoughts had been like this all day: while sweeping the waiting room, he'd thought about Greyson leaning on the counter; while selling body jewelry, he'd wondered why Greyson let his ear piercings heal over. He'd once had studs in each ear, and they'd looked damn hot on him.

Floyd couldn't help himself. He picked up the phone to send a quick text.

*What time are your fitness classes?*

He barely had the safe locked before he had an answer – a short listing of class times on each day of the week.

Floyd held his phone next to the week's schedule, his eyes flickering back and forth. He smiled when he noticed that he was off Friday evening, and Greyson was doing a class.

“Perfect. I can make that.”

Then another idea occurred to him. If Greyson was still a fast healer like he once had been – bruises seemed to vanish within a day or two for him, an ability Floyd was jealous of – then he could tattoo every week.

Maybe every Friday evening, after class.

They could do the class together and shower together before they came to the studio...

He blushed, rubbing his cheeks for a moment before picking up his phone and locking up the office. Along the way, he answered.

*Thanks. I can make it to your Friday class.*

He had a response instantly.

*Yes, would love to see you there. Before our next session?*

Floyd laughed under his breath. Maybe Greyson was having the same thoughts.

*Yeah. Your skin needs to be clean for the tattoo but we can shower together...*

He hesitated before pressing send on the message. Was that too forward? Were they at the text-flirting stage yet?

“Fuck it.” He hit send.

The answer came moments later.

*;) Speaking of, when's the date?*

Floyd grinned, tapping his phone against his chin for a moment. He pocketed it as he worked through his schedule in his head and locked up the shop, striding out once the security alarm was armed.

Then, Floyd answered as soon as he was on the street outside, the door securely locked.

*Sunday afternoon lunch and walk?*

He was off Sunday, so he could spend the whole day with him quite easily. Maybe he could do that regularly... Floyd liked the idea of a routine. Friday evening classes, Friday or Saturday tattoo sessions, Sunday dates...

*Christ, we fucked once and I'm lining up my weekend schedule for two months,* Floyd thought. He tried desperately to get the harebrained ideas out of his head.

*Perfect :) Noon at the same cafe as before?*

Yep :) Floyd answered, then tucked his phone away for the walk back home.

With thoughts of Greyson on his mind the whole time, he was barely in the apartment before he was picking up the phone again to text Kevin.

*Hey Kev, I've got a real date now. Call me for the details :D*

Floyd busied himself making supper as he waited for Kevin to have a minute to steal away after practice. It was hard keeping in touch with him, but he had no doubt Kevin would interrogate him as soon as humanly possible.

It had been way too long since he'd had a proper date when lunch and a walk sounded like the most romantic idea ever.

## Greyson

"Here, put a label on this one."

"Sure." Greyson grabbed a marker to scrawl the car name and tire position on a piece of masking tape, then slapped it on the tire his dad had rolled in his direction.

"How's work going, then?" his dad asked as he tightened the lug nuts on the new summer tire.

It was a pretty safe topic of conversation. Greyson wheeled the tire to the back of the garage to stack with the others. "Can't complain. Classes are getting busy. Summer is workout season."

"I'd have thought people would be out exercising while it's warm out."

Greyson laughed. "No, it's just less awful to walk between the gym and the car this time of year."

His dad grunted, then eased himself up to do the next tire. They were almost done with this car, and then there was just one more – his mom's.

"Still thinking about becoming a cop again? I bet the force would hire you in a flash."

Greyson almost winced. He hadn't told his parents the real reasons for leaving Alberta – not all of them, at least. He'd hated it there and wanted to move back here, sure, but... he hadn't talked about the DV call.

"I'm sure they would," he lied, shrugging. "But I like the pace of life now."

"It must be a lot less stressful. Your mother and I figured you'd get out of it when you raised a family."

Greyson was avoiding that one like the plague. "Better hours, almost the same pay, a lot easier work, and it's less dangerous."

"Right," his father agreed. "But the benefits are better."

Greyson knew his dad wanted him back on the force, but at least he



wasn't coming out and saying it. He'd always been proudest of him for being a man's man while he was a cop. And it had been his father's suggestion to go into it at all. His idea of fixing bullying was to learn to fight better.

It had worked, sort of. Greyson's confidence was higher than ever, but then he'd gone and seen – and done – enough shit for one lifetime in a few years.

Being a first responder wasn't something he was ever going to feel good about. His guilt about that one mistake—that huge mistake—here in Fredericton overshadowed his pride about the work he'd done in Alberta. It was a dark cloud over his record. Thinking about it only aggravated the itch under his skin to absolve that guilt.

Greyson didn't answer, and his father didn't say anything more except to ask for wrenches or swap tires with him.

When they were done, Greyson moved with his dad to the house for lunch. He'd had his long-sleeved shirt on to make sure the freshly healing skin stayed clean. That was another discussion he had to have with them today.

“All done? Wash up and let's have sandwiches and soup.”

That was his mother, still younger and more energetic than his dad. She tended to be understanding of him, if not overly warm. Neither of his parents really were, though.

“Thanks.” Greyson was careful as he pushed up his sleeves to wash his hands, wincing at the tender skin underneath. Then, he carefully rolled up the sleeves to be a little tidier at the dinner table. Black outlines of mountains peeked out from under the rolled fabric.

Naturally, he hadn't even had a few bites of his sandwich before his parents noticed. “Is that a temporary tattoo?” his father frowned, reaching out to poke toward his wrist.

“Afraid not,” Greyson smiled. “I'm getting sleeves done.”

There was a moment of silence before his mother nodded. “Well, I didn't see that coming, but it's your own decision.”

“No regulations on what you can get done if you're working at the gym, I suppose,” his father agreed.

Greyson's jaw twitched in irritation but he nodded nonetheless. “And I'm liking it there, too. They're adding another class a week to my schedule next week.”

“That's great.” His mother still kept looking at his forearms, so Greyson sighed and gently pushed his sleeves up. He tried not to rub the material against the tattoos, though there had been constant stinging all day from exactly that. He didn't let them look for long at his inside arms, just the outsides of his forearms. “They'll go all the way up.”

Though both his parents murmured their approval, he could tell it was lukewarm at best.

Oh, well. This was something *he* needed.

His mother went with the tried-and-true segue within minutes, just as he finished his soup. “So, have you met anyone yet?”

Greyson snorted with laughter and shook his head. “Well...” *I'm not telling them anything close to all about it.* “I have met someone I like. That's about all, though. No news yet.”

“Oh, that's new, though. We haven't heard of anyone since you moved back here.”

His father nodded. “It's good for you to meet people and make friends, if your old buddies aren't going to be around.”

*Not telling him that Darren and Lyle are the only ones who still wanna talk to me.*

Greyson's stomach twisted, but he smiled anyway. “Yeah, yeah, of course,” he agreed. “You know Jackson Riley, the blacksmith who did your friends' railings over on...” he gestured, trying to remember their names.

“Sharon and her husband, yes. Lovely couple.”

“Yes, them. I met him and the rest of his family not long ago, and they invited me to come over and chat. They seem like a good bunch. There's a lot of them, too.”

“Mmm.” His mother looked intrigued as she watched him, but she didn't ask any more questions yet. He could just *see* her putting two and two together, though. Not that they didn't know he was gay... but they might not have expected him to “still” be gay, per se. “I see.”

“Good,” his father said again, standing to gather the dishes. “As long as you're not getting tattooed to fit in with the crowd.”

Greyson rocked back on his chair for a moment from sheer surprise, then laughed hard as all four legs hit the ground again. “I'm a *little* past that stage, thanks, Dad.”

“You can never be too sure,” his mother nodded, and then the conversation moved on to her plants and yard work.

That hadn't actually gone too badly. That was the advantage of Greyson's parents having always been a little too distant: telling them anything was easy. He could have it a lot worse.

Floyd

Why the fuck was his phone ringing on Sunday morning?

Shit, had he slept in?!

Floyd sat bolt upright and fought the covers away from his arms so he could grab the phone from his bedside table. He squinted at it, confused to see an incoming call instead of an alarm.

He tapped the answer button and raised his phone to his ear, rolling onto his side and then his front. "Hello?" he murmured, not even trying to disguise his sleep-roughened voice.

"I thought you'd never wake up. Good morning."

It was his mother.

"Morning." Floyd resisted the urge to sigh, just rolled his eyes as hard as he could without straining them. He sat slowly up again, then eased his feet out of bed to stand up and stretch.

"I need you to run me around to a few stores. They didn't tell me the leather wasn't going to stretch because of the way the seam was put together--"

Floyd tuned out the rant as he walked to his window, yanking the blinds open.

A gorgeous day for a walk with Greyson, thank God.

There was no chance to wait for a pause. "I can't run you around today," Floyd interrupted. "I have plans today. I could have if you'd told me earlier..."

"What?" His mother sounded taken aback, to say the least, and no surprise. He'd done just about everything she'd asked for months – years – trying to make up for those lost years. "So you're just saying no?"

"I can't," Floyd said again, keeping his tone carefully neutral. "I can rearrange my schedule and do it tomorrow, though."

"Always making excuses, like you weren't raised better," his mother

muttered, and he could hear clanging dishes in the background. Then a cupboard or door slammed. “Fine, your father will rearrange his life to do it.”

It wasn't like she didn't have a driver's license. She just opted not to use it.

“Okay. Talk to you later this week,” Floyd answered, refusing to fall for the bait. She hung up first, and he sighed, pressing his phone to his face for a moment before tossing it on the bed hard.

God, he hated being the one to say no, but his date with Greyson? He wasn't passing that up for the world.

With that thought in mind, Floyd's mood turned pleasant again and he smiled all the way to the shower.

---

“Hey!”

Floyd was taken aback when he heard Greyson's voice, and it took him a moment to place him. When he did, he smiled. Greyson was leaning against the wall near the restaurant, and he'd walked right by him, lost in his own thoughts.

*Oops. Get it together, man.*

“How's it going?” Floyd greeted, keeping his tone light. God, Greyson was hot. The way his shirt stretched over his biceps, tucked perfectly into his jeans... It was ten times worse now that he knew about those washboard abs underneath. He could see the subtle ripples in the fabric where it pulled tight across his sculpted body.

Greyson raised his eyebrow. “Better now that you're around,” he winked, and God, the charm just oozed from every fiber of his being.

And Floyd lapped it up. “Let's find a seat,” Floyd answered, but he knew his cheeks were burning.

“How was your day?”

“Er... not long since we've seen each other,” Floyd laughed. “Nothing interesting happened.” *Just that call from my mother, and that's hardly interesting.*

Greyson nodded as he held the door open for Floyd, and Floyd smelled his distinctive musk – mossy and leather and just a little lavender – tickling his nose. Worse yet, his shoulder brushed against Greyson's

broad chest, and tingling warmth spread through his whole body in a flash.

Oh, Jesus, he wanted to be in Greyson's strong arms again.

"Table for two, please." Once they were seated, Floyd distracted himself. "S-So, what about your day?" he asked, a bit too brightly. "Did anything interesting happen?"

"Not much. I went to see my parents. Swapped out the winter tires for summer ones."

"Oh, that's exciting." Floyd made a face, and Greyson laughed. "I mean, unless you're into mechanical stuff..."

"Not really," Greyson shrugged. "But it's something my dad and I can do together."

"Right." Floyd watched him for a moment, trying not to get pulled in by the way his lips pursed, or his broad hands fidgeted with the lunch menu...

*He's so gorgeous. And he knows it.* Floyd couldn't get sucked in by the man's incessant charm. Greyson had a dad who helped him change his tires, for God's sakes. He'd drag him into his weird family dynamics and recovery process and all that shit.

And if they broke up... this time, going not just from partners to nothing, but from *partners* to nothing...

His mental state was going to be fucked up again.

Sure, last time was getting out an abusive relationship while losing his work partner and quitting his job... but he didn't want to go through anything like that again. Even if his life was just slow and steady, at least he knew what it would bring him.

It didn't stop his heart from fluttering as he watched Greyson order, the friendly smile on his lips and the deeply-ingrained politeness that made him nod several times as he handed back the menu.

"O-Oh, uh... What he's having."

Shit. He was crushing like a fucking teenager, forgetting his order and getting entranced by just watching the way he moved.

What was wrong with him?

Floyd kept the conversation as light as he could until their food came out and they dug in. It was nice to have company while he ate,

though. He'd forgotten how much he missed that since his last relationship. God, when was that?

He'd made a few attempts at them since dumping Brett, but none had lasted long.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Floyd smiled apologetically and shook his head. "Sorry, I totally spaced out there. What were you saying before about, uh, Alberta... gardens?"

"Just different, being back here and seeing... you know, all the cute little houses and their cute little yards. It's a nice atmosphere here." Greyson was watching him, those dark eyes too perceptive by far. "D'you like it?"

"I like it enough to stick around here," Floyd shrugged his agreement. "I never really felt the pull of the big city. I mean, some of my friends like Chase came here just to get away from the fast pace. But I know a lot more people who are leaving."

"That's kind of sad, when you put it that way," Greyson laughed. "Like me. But they'll be back when they're ready to settle down and start a family..."

Then, it was Greyson's turn to pause, his almost automatic charm interrupted by a moment of embarrassment. His cheeks were red as he grabbed his water glass.

*Can't resist.* "So, are you looking for a nice hubby and kids?" Floyd teased, leaning back in his seat and grinning as Greyson's eyes dropped to the table with embarrassment. "Came back here to find them?"

"I – someday, yeah," Greyson said, his voice even hesitating. "I'm not opposed to the idea."

"Which one?"

"Both."

Floyd smiled, then leaned forward a little. "I want them, too. But not yet."

"God, no," Greyson laughed quickly, seemingly glad to move past this. He pushed back his dishes while Floyd did the same. "So, up for that walk yet?"

"Sure," Floyd grinned. He still had Greyson's embarrassment stuck in

his head. It was like he hadn't wanted to admit that to anyone – or like he hadn't even thought about it himself.

---

Their hands were *nearly* brushing by the time they reached the park. Floyd's nerves were crackling with impatient hunger while he desperately tried to focus on Greyson's words.

Greyson's hands were tucked into his pockets as he wandered alongside Floyd. They'd crossed the walking bridge to the other side of the river, and they were wandering up the trail. Floyd had never walked this far out, but it felt like nothing alongside Greyson.

"A surprising number of skills transfer over from the force to fitness," Greyson was telling him. "Being able to assess people's builds and mannerisms quickly, place their type. Assess their reactions. Most of all, know when they're hurting themselves or when they're not pushing hard enough."

Floyd shifted, a knot twisting in his stomach. He'd never felt easy about the skills he'd taken from his own brief stint in the force – training, then four months of service until the incident. Plus, afterward, a month of bitter resentment until the slow slide downhill into drinking and feeling sorry for himself.

"Sorry," Greyson added after a moment, his voice uncertain now. "I keep forgetting it was so long ago for you."

Floyd shook his head. "Feels like yesterday sometimes."

"I miss it."

"I don't." Floyd's words were harder than he'd intended, his voice steely.

Greyson looked at him for a few moments, his expression hard to read, but there was a wrinkle between his brows and he wasn't leaning into him. Then, he looked away and hummed, dropping the subject. "Should we turn around? I don't know what lies this far out."

"The north side, so mysterious."

"By foot, it is," Floyd laughed. "I walk around downtown, not this far out." He pivoted with Greyson to walk back toward the bridge. "I suppose you had better trails out in Alberta."

Greyson shrugged. "Some. I didn't get out much."



"Mm." Floyd gestured toward Greyson's arms. "So, everything healing fine?" He'd chosen a long-sleeved shirt with thin, loose sleeves, which was a wise decision.

"Oh, yeah." Greyson unbuttoned one of his sleeves, and Floyd's skin tingled with desire. He pushed it aside to focus on Greyson's reddened, yet clearly healing skin. The outlines looked crisper now.

Floyd raised his eyebrows. "Jeez, you still do heal fast." He looked like he'd had it done a couple days ago now, not just yesterday.

Greyson half-smiled. "I know." His eyes flickered as he pushed his sleeve back down. "Anyway, you should come to a class. You hinted at it before."

"A group one?" Floyd touched his hair in thought, running a hand back and forth over the close-cropped hairs at the back of his neck. He'd just decided the other day to do it, so this was his chance to follow through. "Okay. The one next Friday..."

"How about sooner? A one-on-one session, free?"

"Uh-uh," Floyd shook his head, shoving Greyson's side while being careful not to jostle his arm. "You pay for my services, I pay for yours."

"The first session's usually free," Greyson informed him with a smug grin.

Floyd eyed Greyson, then shook his head. He couldn't argue that. "Okay, but the other ones aren't. We'll work out a trade for the tattoo time versus training time. How about Wednesday?"

This was way more than tattoos for training, or even than a date for the reunion.

Greyson laughed. "Sure." He looked even more self-satisfied. "Perfect."

They were back at Floyd's car now, and Floyd leaned on the door handle. "So..."

"So, this was nice," Greyson commented, his smile simple and direct. "Can we do it again?"

Floyd nodded. He couldn't remember such an enjoyable Sunday afternoon. The only way to make it better... well, he couldn't invite him home again so soon, could he? *No, knock it off.* "Definitely. Maybe next weekend."

“Great,” Greyson murmured, stepping closer. He slid a hand onto Floyd's waist, then stepped between his feet to close the gap between them.

Floyd easily let go of the car and rested his own hands carefully on those powerful hips. He tried not to think about what they were capable of. He leaned in until their lips met, then slid slowly along each other. Soft, passionate kisses swept him along on a tide of desire until Floyd pulled back.

“See you soon.” Floyd managed to keep his voice steady, which amazed even him, but the moment Greyson's hands slid away from him, he was left colder than he'd realized. The warmth of even walking next to him wasn't to be underestimated.

Greyson looked delicious standing there in his black leather jacket, dark red collared shirt, and dark jeans that showed off every inch of his muscled legs and great ass. Floyd dragged his eyes back to Greyson's face and gave a quick wave, then circled around to the driver's side.

By the time he pulled away, Greyson was climbing into his own car, but the image of Greyson standing on the sidewalk watching after him wasn't going to leave his mind any time soon.

And he still tasted Greyson's warm, soft lips.

God, he wanted this man.

## Greyson

“Right in the middle! That's my boy!”

Greyson's back straightened with pride at his father's exclamation from the other side of the bar. The double bull meant an easy victory for him. He eyed the dart board for a moment, then walked over to collect his darts.

“Oh, Jesus,” Mark exclaimed, slapping his back on the way by in both congratulations and condemnation. “Dave, your boy here's got us beat.”

Greyson grinned at him. “Your go.”

The rest of the round was lazy. His dad's buddies, Mark, Andrew, and Hugh, didn't even want to try against him.

The atmosphere here was laid-back. Everyone seemed welcoming, even when Greyson had shown up for the first time in years a few months ago. Sometimes his dad came to the bar too, and sometimes not. Most of the guys knew his dad better than him, but they all respected him for his former career.

The round was done as fast as that, and Greyson laid down his darts. He sat down to finish the rest of his beer, tuning into the conversations nearby.

“...near the fairy grove. Just down the street from them.”

Greyson's shoulders rose and he fought to keep his expression neutral. He knew exactly who that referred to, but he played dumb as he turned to his dad. “From who now?”

“You know, the brothers.”

“Which brothers?”

“The Rileys.”

“Fairy Grove? Is that the neighborhood?”

His father rolled his eyes and flagged down another beer from the bartender. “Oh, don't get politically correct with me.”

Hugh was laughing in the background while Mark eyed Greyson for his reaction.

*Don't let them get a rise.* Greyson just raised his eyebrow. "Everyone bitches about Alberta being stuck in the seventies--"

"Oh, don't take it so seriously," his father laughed. "Anyway, you heard of that new corner store? Butch and his kid are supposed to be running it..."

Greyson tuned out again as his father started talking more to Mark, Jeff, and the other half-dozen guys within earshot, just gazing across the bar to idly watch the TV. The game was some minor league clash, but not Toronto. Otherwise he would have been much more interested.

"What?"

His father was jostling him, gesturing across the room to the pretty young woman seated on the other side of the bar. This bar was the rare type that made women feel comfortable even though there were dart boards and sports TVs. It was easy to flirt here, and the bartenders kept an eye out for anyone who was putting on too much pressure.

"What about her?"

"She looks like your type."

Greyson gave him a flat stare of disbelief, unable to hide the pinching of his brows. "Really?"

His dad turned to Hugh and Mark. "Doesn't she?"

*How the fuck would you remember my type?* Years ago, he'd flirted with women to keep up appearances – before he'd been free from everyone, free enough to choose his own adventure. He didn't think he'd shown that much interest in any one woman.

"Yeah, go buy her a drink. Chat her up." That was Jeff, in the background, leaning around Mark. "She looks your age."

Greyson cut a glare back to his father as the other guys chimed in with their agreement, then jerked his chin to the side, near the wall, where nobody was sitting. He grabbed his beer bottle and strode over there, ignoring the 'ooh's from the other guys.

"What's your problem?" he hissed, his voice low. "First you bust out that old fairy shit again, and then you're trying to set me up with some chick?"

His dad seemed blithely unconcerned as he sipped his beer. "I thought she seemed your type anyway."

"*She* did? *She*?" Greyson emphasized, and he knew he was glaring now, but he didn't care. It was petty of his father to do whatever the fuck this was, and he was going to be petty right back.

"What about that girl back when you were a cop? The other cop? I thought the two of you..."

Greyson had to search his mind, but of course, it didn't take long. There had only been one other unmarried woman his own age – Mandy, who'd worked traffic. His father had seen them at the ceremonies and got stuck on the idea of his police son marrying a policewoman. Making the perfect police family.

Even back then, Greyson had known it wasn't right.

His father did, too, as stubbornly as he tried to ignore it. Greyson shook his head with a derisive snort. "No. Just... no." He gulped down the last few sips of beer and set it down on the table nearby with a scoff.

He wanted another drink before he headed home. He wasn't going to storm out on that note; everyone else would know *something* was up. So Greyson swallowed his pride, turning his back on his dad to head back to the bar and order another. Then his dad was back in his chair, too, like nothing had ever happened.

The others let it blow over, even if he saw a few curious looks. No doubt some of them thought he had some secret girlfriend now. Or else they suspected the truth.

Greyson's shoulders hunched slightly as he rested his elbows on the bar, his chest rising and falling a little faster. It wasn't like he was ashamed. And they weren't gonna take him out back and beat him or anything. But...

But then there were little snide comments, the feigned innocence during cruel jokes, the laughter behind his back.

He didn't want to put up with that shit.

Greyson chatted to the others when they talked to him, but he couldn't keep it up for much longer. When he finished that beer he headed out with a wave, laughing and rolling his eyes when he was accused of leaving before the others could outscore him in the next darts game.

The smile dropped off his face the moment he was out in the dark parking lot, kicking at each piece of gravel that skittered across pavement on his route home.

He really needed another beer... or six.

---

Greyson hadn't felt an urge this strong in months. His stomach was tight, his fingers fidgety, and he couldn't focus on anything for more than a few seconds. Anxiety burned under his skin, the flames fueled higher the more he tried to ignore it.

It was like he couldn't contain himself, he was crawling slowly out of his skin and up the wall.

Or like he couldn't breathe, couldn't quite feel himself and know it was him.

Words failed him, but he knew what the sensation meant: he needed to be grounded. He needed to feel *real* again. And the easiest way...

"No," Greyson whispered, letting out a slow breath. He wasn't going to relapse now – not over his fresh tattoos, and not on his thighs or anywhere else, damn it. He'd been fighting this for too long to slip.

Besides, he knew someone who would want to help.

*Can we hang out tonight?*

He hovered over Floyd's last message, rereading the chain, then pressed "send" before he chickened out.

Floyd's response came within a minute.

*Yeah, I had a shitty day and I want company. You?*

*Me too.*

Greyson smiled slightly. He wasn't happy that Floyd was unhappy, but it was kind of nice not to have to pretend to be happy and shit around him. Floyd knew... at least the bare bones of his situation, but still...

It was hard to pretend all the time, but even harder to let control slip and let someone in.

Greyson's phone went off again with another text from Floyd. This one was simple.

*Come over?*

*On my way.*

Everything felt like it took much too long, but Greyson hauled himself to his feet and changed into a nicer shirt, then set off for the quick drive to Floyd's apartment.

---

"Come on in."

Greyson smiled at the sight of Floyd in a t-shirt and casual, ripped jeans. He'd clearly been lounging about, too. The faint pattern of tattoos peeking through the rips on his jeans was downright hot, but he dragged his eyes back up to Floyd's face as he walked into the apartment.

The living room was spacious and bright, and best of all, familiar to Greyson. He crashed next to Floyd on the couch once his shoes were off, stretching his arms along the back of the sofa. Greyson nodded at the TV, which was playing an obnoxious medication commercial. "What's on?"

"Really nothing," Floyd laughed. "Just watching sports."

"What kind?"

"Baseball."

Greyson made a face, and Floyd's laugh this time was startled but sincere. "You don't like baseball?" Floyd asked.

"No... I've always thought it's boring as crap," Greyson shrugged. "Hockey, football, soccer, rugby, curling..."

"Curling?" Floyd snorted. "I used to do that as a kid."

Greyson smirked. Somehow, he wasn't terribly surprised. "Really? Were you any good?"

Floyd mumbled, "Not at all." He turned back to the TV and flipped up a few channels to find a hockey game rerun.

"I'd be bad at it too, I'm sure," Greyson grinned. "I never knew that. Were you uncoordinated or did you have bad aim? Or did you not sweep intensely enough?"

"Fuck off," Floyd laughed. "I bet you only played manly sports."

"Hockey for a bit," Greyson nodded. "I wasn't as bulky as the other kids, though... Jesus, these days it's bad. They bring their kids into the

gym for training at ten, eleven years old, to make sure they get bigger. Even back then, it wasn't that bad. You just accepted you'd get slammed around a little more. You remember me back in high school. By then I was out, it was only the pros or wanna-be pros still doing it. Heh, it'll be weird seeing them again... seeing if any of them actually pursued it."

Their knees brushed, and Floyd was leaning back against his arm. Even though it stung slightly, Greyson ignored it and didn't pull back from him. Instead, he shifted so the sides of their thighs lightly pressed.

Floyd rubbed his hair, half-watching the TV and half-watching Greyson. "Did you suspect even then?"

"The gay thing? Nah," Greyson shrugged. Then, he hesitated. "Well..."

Floyd smirked, an "aha" expression on his face. "Mm?"

"There were a few other guys I admired... a lot..."

Floyd laughed. "Yeah, me too. Then I realized I wanted to fuck them or be fucked by them."

"Took me a long time to work that one out," Greyson shook his head. "I'm kinda glad I didn't really know back then, or things *would* have been more awkward. But everyone else guessed years before me anyway." He'd never really had a chance to be in the closet to anyone else – just himself, and maybe his family. But half of that was them being stubborn shitheads about it.

Floyd chuckled. "I didn't. Didn't see that coming at all." He licked his lips unconsciously, and God, they were so fucking kissable.

"That's what he said," Greyson smirked, unable to resist the tease. Floyd rolled his eyes at him and shook his head. "Sorry."

"You haven't changed a bit. It's just *he* instead of *she* now, isn't it?" Floyd grinned.

Greyson laughed and half-shrugged. He'd always been a smooth talker; he'd just never gotten the chance to direct his attention to Floyd before now. "Maybe."

Floyd's eyes flickered down to Greyson's lips for a moment, then back up to his eyes. "Good thing I like that." He shook his head, like he was trying to put something out of his head and focus on Greyson.

Greyson slid his arm forward, until it properly rested against Floyd's shoulders, around the back of his neck, his fingers wrapped around



Floyd's upper arm. That brought Floyd's attention to a single point – him. “You're a sucker for a sweet-talker.”

Floyd shifted so their thighs pressed together harder, warmth shooting through Greyson at the close contact and the way Floyd was watching him. “God, am I ever.”

*I need to get my mind off shit. It sounds like he does, too.* Greyson leaned in slowly, giving Floyd time to anticipate it, and Floyd met him halfway. Their lips melded together in a crash of warmth and desire.

It took seconds before Greyson's skin was burning with need. His breath caught roughly in his throat. His cock stirred to life, along with his desire to push Floyd down on the sofa and press himself between those hot thighs.

“Yes!” Floyd moaned through the kiss in a feverish mumble, then gasped when Greyson caught his lip and sucked it lightly. Greyson loved the way Floyd's breathing stuttered before he mumbled something else.

“Hm?” Greyson murmured, pulling back just enough to breathe against the wet, sensitive skin.

Floyd gasped, “I said, I wanna suck you.”

Fire burst under Greyson's skin, his cock instantly throbbing in his pants at the thought of those beautiful, broad lips pursed around the tip of his cock. “Oh, yeah.”

“Cool.” Floyd slithered out from under his arm, squirming against his hold until he managed to slide to the floor. Greyson promptly squeezed his shoulders, then cupped his cheeks.

Floyd pressed his lips against Greyson's denim-clad inner thigh, but the jeans were thick enough that he could only barely feel warm pressure. It was a fucking tease this way. “You look so hot from down here.”

It was hard for Greyson to reconcile his mental image of himself with Floyd's sincere words. Floyd's pupils were huge as he stared at Greyson like he was the hottest thing in the *world*. Greyson's cheeks flushed with heat and he looked away for a moment.

Normally, he could take a compliment, and he knew objectively that guys found him hot. That was how he got laid so easily.

Floyd mistook it as an attempt to control his arousal. “I love making you lose control.” He kissed up Greyson's leg to his crotch, then the

bulge forming in the front of his jeans. "I love the look on your face when you come. I love the way your cock tastes."

Greyson easily remembered last time: Floyd's hot mouth around him, Floyd's skilled tongue lapping around his head and sucking his swollen rod down into his throat.

"But this time," Floyd whispered, his voice harsh as he unbuttoned Greyson's jeans and yanked them down enough to get his hard cock out into the air, "I wanna finish you off this way."

Greyson gasped. The hot erection stood out in cool air for only a moment before Floyd's broad, talented hand was wrapping around the shaft, pushing a tight ring down to the base. "Christ. O-Okay." Floyd was stubborn and determined, like he knew exactly what he wanted, and it made Greyson even hotter.

Floyd's tongue trailed up along the underside of the shaft, and then down the seam between his balls.

"F-Fuck!" Greyson's breathing was even harsher now as he writhed into the sofa, spreading his knees further apart. Floyd's talented tongue swiped around each of his balls, then up the bottom of the shaft all the way to the tip.

Floyd hummed against the flesh, then slid his pursed lips around the shaft in a quick burst of wet warmth.

This sensation never got old. Greyson hummed, then moaned his pleasure as Floyd's pursed lips slid slowly down his shaft to the base and back up again, enveloping all of him with the beautiful pressure. He kneaded Floyd's shoulders, his head rolling back against the back of the couch.

"Mmmm," Floyd moaned around his cock, his tongue swiping back and forth across the head and around it. The vibrations made Greyson gasp and twitch, his thighs tensing up for a second. Floyd noticed the reaction and moaned again, his teeth very lightly grazing the shaft.

"Yes...!" Greyson gasped, his body briefly tensing and shuddering. That particular controlled burn was *always* ten times better than he remembered.

Floyd sucked the head of his cock down into his throat and swallowed a few times, his throat muscles working around him, and Greyson was almost out of his mind with pleasure. Not only could he talk dirty like a pro, but he could deep-throat him.

Oh, Christ, Greyson was so fucking close to coming already. Floyd's

lips and tongue and cheeks and teeth... Every part of him worked on Greyson for his pleasure.

When Greyson glanced down to watch his own swollen, reddened shaft sliding back and forth across those supple lips, he was startled to find Floyd's eyes on him. The wide hazel eyes were fixed on his every expression and reaction.

Somehow, that was even hotter than any other single detail of the experience.

"Christ," Greyson whispered, unable to tear his eyes away from Floyd's face now. He tangled his hand in the hair at the back of Floyd's head, the nails of his other hand biting into Floyd's muscled shoulder. He was so close...

Floyd sucked his lips back up to the tip and wrapped his hand around the shaft to squeeze and stroke while he sucked the tip hard.

Greyson's body tensed, his head slamming into the back of the couch while his hips shoved up and his cock pulsed his pleasure. His whole body tightened and released unconsciously and he was gone, swept away on the tide of pleasure.

"Y-Yes...! Floyd, fuck, yes..." Greyson moaned, and Floyd just kept steadily licking around the head and sucking it firmly.

He couldn't look away from Floyd for a second, well aware that Floyd was drinking in every second of his orgasm just as much as the hot pleasure that pulsed from his cock. Only when he had to squeeze his eyes shut did he do so.

Even then, he quickly looked back at Floyd when the blackness cleared again from his thoughts and vision. "Oh," Greyson groaned, his hips shoving forward a few more times to get the last few shivers out of the way before he flopped back on the couch with a gasp.

"Mmm," Floyd moaned. He pulled away, his throat working as he swallowed, then grinned. "You're very noisy."

Greyson's cheeks were already flushed from the heat, but they prickled again. He mumbled, "Yeah, sometimes. When I'm getting the best blowjob ever."

"Compliment accepted," Floyd teased, rocking back onto his heels. He wasn't quick to rise to his feet, still crouching there and gazing up the length of Greyson's body. "Christ, that was hot. *You're* hot."

Greyson shoved Floyd's shoulder lightly and laughed. "Get back up

here.” He carefully tucked himself back in his underwear and hauled his jeans back up, buttoning them up one-handed.

When Floyd crashed next to him, Floyd's arm went around his shoulders instead. Greyson hated to admit it, but he felt safer than ever in Floyd's hold.

They held each other for a minute, and Greyson reached out to try to feel up Floyd's thigh. Floyd just pushed his hand away with a smile and shake of his head. “I'm fine.”

Greyson nodded, then leaned into Floyd's side again, half-closing his eyes as he watched the game. They stayed like this for a minute in contented silence.

Floyd finally murmured, “You wanna stay over?”

Greyson shook his head, but he smiled at Floyd anyway. He just wanted to be in his own bed again, but he was starting to feel the pull to have Floyd there with him, too. “I'll be okay on my own.” The gnawing anxiety under his skin was gone for now.

It wasn't even the sex. It had vanished the moment he'd seen Floyd's friendly face opening the door.

“I'll see you Wednesday for our one-on-one session, right?”

Greyson snorted. “I hope so. Don't skip out on me.”

Floyd laughed. “Quitting before I start? Not a chance.”

“Good. Come ready to work out,” Greyson teased.

He stayed until the end of the game before hauling himself up to his feet again, his skin still pleasantly tingling from the pleasant, easy company. Around Floyd, it was so easy to be himself – even when he was low-energy. Every time, Floyd left him smiling and thinking about the next time they were going to see each other.

*He's an addiction, and the best kind for me.*

Floyd

“Excuse me – is Greyson in?”

The blond receptionist glanced up at Floyd, his eyebrows raised. “Right. He was expecting someone. He's over in the back weight room.”

“Thanks.” Floyd brushed off his workout clothes and turned to take in the gym. He wasn't exactly scrawny, but it was easy to feel self-conscious among guys who actually hit the gym every day.

He thought he saw the blond guy's eyes on him for a moment, but when he glanced back, he was looking away with a little smile. It was kind of nice to be hit on, even if he wasn't interested in it.

Floyd strode to the weight room, trying to ignore the burly dudes watching themselves in the mirror as they slowly curled their biceps and triceps, and shit. It was a lot easier to ignore them when he saw Greyson there in a tight little t-shirt setting up racks of weights. “Hey. Ready to train the newbie?”

Greyson straightened up and grinned. “So ready. Ready to learn?”

“Yes, teacher,” Floyd winked. It was a bit unnerving to see himself in the mirrors lining the room, and it made his imagination wander to all kinds of dirtier possibilities. He tried to put them out of mind, though.

Greyson's shoulder blades bulged through the back of his shirt as he turned to grab a set of weights for himself, spinning them casually in his hands. “How are you?”

“Great.” Floyd could hardly keep his eyes on Greyson's face now that he'd noticed his shorts stretching tight around his muscled thighs. “Just great. You?”

Greyson smirked as he approached, still idly turning the weights this way and that. “Good. Here, grab these.”

Floyd wrapped his hands around the cylindrical handles, the weights dropping to his thighs before he adjusted for the weight and lifted them again. “A bit heavy, but that's all right.”

“Good. They should be a strain, but not much of one.” Greyson stayed close to him. He was just half a pace closer than average, but Floyd had no idea how personal space worked here. “Let’s see. What do you need to know...? Ah, right. Here, I’ll show you the three basic positions we’ll be using...”

Floyd swallowed hard, keeping his eyes on his own form in the mirror and trying not to watch Greyson's ass in it instead. Greyson wrapped his hand around the handle to guide Floyd's motion. “Up this way, breathe... that's it. Remember to breathe. And down this way, in a controlled motion, making it as slow as you can handle. And when you have your arm out this way, up and down like this...”

Floyd's cheeks were flushed with heat from the amusement of trying to bite back his comments. He glanced around in the mirror, glad nobody was too close to them.

“And in and out, if we're lucky,” Greyson whispered, then took a step back. “Perfect. You're set.”

Floyd's lips parted, and he saw himself blush in the mirror. “Mm...”

Greyson abruptly pulled back from him, clapping his shoulder on the way by to the door. “Get familiar with the weights. I'll be back in a minute.”

Floyd let out a breath and tried to keep himself calm, watching his form as he moved the free weights up and down at different angles. He'd lifted weights years ago with buddies in cop training, but not since then.

The place was quiet right now, at least. This room seemed a little smaller than the weight room closer to the front, with less fancy gear, but that meant it drew less people. Floyd preferred it already.

“Right,” Greyson said as he approached, clapping his hands and grabbing weights for himself. “Have a seat.”

Floyd settled into the familiar position with his spine against the backrest, his body settling into a comfortable, safe form. It was pure muscle memory, since he hadn't done it in years. Listening to Greyson's instructions came on automatic as they did reps and sets with a few different weights.

“Your form's just fine. You remember your gym time, huh?”

Floyd nodded, out of breath but starting to feel high off the burn in his arms and chest. “Yeah, more than I expected.”

"You can up your weights with your form looking so good."

"I can't handle more yet," Floyd snorted. "Start me slow."

"You're not even breaking a sweat. Trust me." Greyson hopped up from his bench, setting down his own weights and grabbing Floyd's to swap them out for weights that were a couple pounds heavier.

Floyd made a face. Greyson was right – he was being a wuss, but he didn't want to embarrass himself by failing halfway through a set. He'd just have to steel himself.

Halfway through the set, Greyson smacked him in the stomach.

"Oof!" Floyd nearly dropped the weights. "You asshole."

Greyson laughed. "You're not breathing."

"I-- oh." Floyd settled back again, trying to remember to breathe in and out now as he lifted until his muscles screamed.

The other guys had left, and they were the only two in the room right now, but even so, Greyson didn't try to get closer like Floyd had half-expected. He was just keeping a close eye on Floyd, presumably making sure he wasn't in legitimate medical distress.

"Where do you feel the burn the most?"

"Biceps and pecs and... something in my back I didn't know I had," Floyd grumbled.

Greyson smirked. "Oh, the first time I carried weights while I ran--"

Floyd stared. Weights while he ran? "Oh God, that sounds even more stupidly healthy," he interrupted. "I'll never keep up."

"Don't try to keep up," Greyson laughed, setting his weights down at last. "Okay, you're done. Man, you're good considering. I run every morning for fun, and then I work out here. It's half my day. You're busy doing delicate work all day."

Floyd made a face as he carried his weights back over to the rack, then wiped down the bench. "Delicate work?"

"It's a compliment given your career," Greyson laughed. He led Floyd toward the men's locker rooms. "What's your post-workout routine?"

"I don't have one," Floyd admitted.

Greyson nodded. "Scrambled eggs, buttered toast, bacon... treat yourself today," he told him. "Give yourself a good traditional big

breakfast. I'll get you more fine-tuned as you go on."

"Oh God, I've done it now. You're never gonna let me go, are you?" Floyd laughed.

"Nope," Greyson agreed with a cheery smile. "When are you working?"

"I'm running the shop all day Friday, but maybe a Saturday class..."

"Definitely join my group class. We do the same kind of weight-lifting while we lunge and squat and so on. You'll feel it the next day," Greyson promised. He laughed. "Especially if you don't goddamn breathe."

"I get caught up!" Floyd insisted. He shoved Greyson's shoulder, and Greyson automatically shoved him back. "This was fun, though." He hadn't done anything this fun in ages. They halted in front of the locker room.

"I gotta get going to set up for a class," Greyson told him, smiling lightly. "But thanks for coming, man."

"No problem. Thanks for the free training. I'll be back," Floyd promised. He took a quick glance around – nobody.

Greyson grabbed his shoulder and leaned in for a quick kiss, their lips warm and tender for just that moment. Then he looked flustered as he pulled back abruptly.

"Bye," Floyd grinned. He kept his voice low and intimate, for Greyson's ears only. "Can't wait to get up and down with you again."

This time, Greyson turned red. He cleared his throat, raising his hand for a quick wave. "See you." He strode off toward the front desk while Floyd grinned after him.

Floyd's chest was light as he pushed the locker room door open to grab a shower and change. He could get used to this.



## Greyson

"Welcome! Come on in!" Jackson beamed as he pushed the screen door open for Greyson, letting him into the house.

"Thanks," Greyson smiled broadly, shaking Jackson's hand and clapping his shoulder in a quick greeting. "I almost forgot about the barbecue," he admitted after a moment, laughing. "A lot happened this week."

"Glad we didn't have to come hunt you down," Cam told him from the background, where he was chopping lettuce.

"Like what?" Jackson added.

In answer, Greyson unbuttoned his shirt sleeve and gently rolled it up to show off the healing sleeve across his forearm. As always, he kept his wrist turned in.

"Oh, shit!" Jackson exclaimed, then grinned. "Guys, come look. This is cool..."

"That's Floyd's work, isn't it?" Chase commented as he pushed himself off the couch to come see. "Yeah, definitely is."

"Nicely spotted," Greyson chuckled. "Can you recognize his work just from--"

Chase was already nodding hard.

"Stupid question, huh?" Greyson laughed.

Chase hedged with a shrug. "Uh... Well, we all have our own styles, that's all."

Greyson grinned. "Right." He pushed his sleeve further up to show off all the way up to his elbow. "It's only at the very beginning stages. We're going to have a couple months of weekly sessions to get the damn things done."

Chase's eyes widened. "Weekly?" He seemed to be trying to find a polite way to ask if Floyd was reckless or not.

"I heal really fast," Greyson added to reassure him.

Chase relaxed and laughed. "Okay. Just making sure."

"That I'm not one of those trouble customers who demands to be healed while I'm scabbing over and gross?"

"Ewww. Not before supper," Thomas complained. "Guys, someone grab the burgers."

"Oh, shit." Jackson took off running for the back door while everyone burst out laughing.

Greyson laughed, too. "Hopefully we don't have burned burgers."

"Nah," Cameron smiled. "They just might not be as juicy as usual."

"Ooooh," Noah smirked, sidling past Cameron to get to the microwave. "That's a shame. The juicier, the better."

Greyson felt at home already, his shoulders sinking with relief at how easily everyone welcomed him in. He hadn't been sure at first if the brothers and their boyfriends would be too insular to really talk to, but they all seemed genuinely pleased to have him around.

God, to have a family like this.

"So Floyd isn't around?"

Alex, who'd been quiet until now as he leaned against the counter and watched the rest of them, spoke up. "Not right now. I think he's at work, right, Chase?"

"Yep. But he spoke very highly of you," Chase said, smirking unmistakably. "So we wanted to invite you around."

Greyson was hard to embarrass, but the way Chase grinned at him made his cheeks feel hot instantly. Everyone *definitely* knew what was up by now, and if they didn't, they guessed. Greyson just didn't know how much Floyd wanted to tell others yet, so... he couldn't really answer that one. "Thanks."

They settled down for supper, and Greyson was relieved that Cam brought up sports instead of his relationship with Floyd as the first topic of conversation. As they grabbed corn cobs, roasted veggies, salad, and burgers, they started bantering about Kevin's chances. From what Greyson knew, Kevin was a good buddy of Floyd's.

"I think he's going to be drafted fast," Cam said with a confident nod. "Great player. He has very good intuition and... well, chemistry. He can read plays and fuckin' read minds sometimes, I swear."

“Yep,” Noah laughed. “I don't know the technical terms for it, but he works well as a team with people.”

“That's what they wanna see in the pro leagues,” Cam said, buttering his corn cob. “You can only get away with being a breakout diva in high school or if your name sounds like a town in Nova Scotia.”

Greyson furrowed his brows for a moment, then laughed. “Right. So he's got a good chance, then.”

“Yeah. Man, it's weird not having him around,” Noah sighed. He was already half-done his burger – and luckily, the burgers *were* still juicy. “And without Cam...”

“Still not playing, then?” All Greyson knew was that Cam had been out for medical reasons, but he'd gotten fixed up since then. “Are you ever going to?”

Jackson tensed up while Thomas cleared his throat, and Greyson's cheeks flushed with his ignorance. Of course it might be a touchy subject.

Cam didn't seem to mind, though. He still had the same easygoing smile as he nodded. “This summer, starting in my backyard. Still a little nervous of competition.”

“Of course,” Greyson instantly responded, still feeling guilty for bringing that up over a nice supper. “Yeah... speaking of high school... I just got an email asking if I can donate something for a prize basket for the reunion.” He made a face.

Jackson snorted. “That's our good old high school. Bet the organizing committee paid themselves, though.”

“Now, you can't assume that,” Cam laughed.

“The guys and girls in Greyson's year? Jesus, do you remember them?”

“I do,” Alex laughed. “Speaking of divas.”

Greyson laughed. That was about damn right. The competition for prom king and queen had been the fiercest of any of the years he'd been in high school, ending with one girl “falling” down a staircase. The prom committee had awarded her the prom queen title, backfiring on the girl everyone suspected had orchestrated it. Violent divas, then. Greyson's brief amusement faded.

Just hearing Noah's lisp or seeing Thomas sway his way around the room was enough to remind Greyson of the young guy he'd once been. He'd had to man up fast between middle and high school, but the

same crowd had still remembered the old him no matter how much muscle he'd put on.

He could look after himself now, and he'd been a little luckier in high school, but he was gonna run into a shitload of people with convenient memory loss about middle school.

"I wonder if any of the teachers will show up," Jackson hummed. "I really hated that physics teacher. Mr. Sprouse."

"Oh, fuck. Him," Greyson groaned. "He was so boring."

"I'm so glad he didn't do chemistry."

"The chemistry teacher was awesome." Greyson's memory wasn't yielding a name, but he shook his head. "Exploding shit was great."

They quickly got sucked into a conversation about teachers, since most of them had been the same between Greyson and Jackson's years, and even Cam and Thomas's.

After supper ended, conversation turned to politics, then back to sports and even art. It was hours before Greyson remembered to look at the time.

"Oh my God, it's already nearly my bedtime."

"Your bedtime?" Chase exclaimed. "Boring. God, it's not even nine."

"*Some* of us get up and work out in the morning," Greyson laughed.

Chase smirked and looked over at Jackson, scooting closer to him. "Yeah, some of us do..."

"Too much information," Cam groaned, rising to his feet to see Greyson out.

After they said their goodbyes, Greyson was shocked at how much he couldn't stop smiling. It was so damn easy to spend time around them, and it didn't even feel like they were going out of their way to accommodate him.

Did Floyd get along with them all so well? Presumably, if he was friends with Kevin and Chase. How big was their damn circle of friends? Certainly bigger than Greyson's, so he was grateful to be welcomed into it so easily.

His cheeks flushed as he walked down the sidewalk toward his own home. More importantly, he couldn't help but wonder what Floyd had said about him to make them want to invite him over.

Maybe he'd ask tomorrow. The thought of seeing Floyd tomorrow made Greyson's smile widen even more.

*I'm so stuck on him.*

He hummed under his breath as he walked through the quiet evening. Floyd's gorgeous face was all he could see in his mind's eye.

Floyd

The shop door jangled, and before it had even closed, Floyd knew who it was.

*Oh, God.*

“Ah, Floyd! Hello,” Floyd’s mother greeted him. It was around noon on Friday, so Floyd hadn’t missed any local events... Was she just in the area and wanting to chat?

Somehow, he suspected not.

“Hi, Mom,” Floyd answered anyway with a smile. Chase was on the other end of the counter and quickly looked up and over, no doubt eager to see his interactions with his mom. Floyd hoped he wouldn’t see the worst of them.

“What are your plans for the weekend?”

*And there’s the catch.* “I have a--”

“I need you to help serve at the church supper,” she informed Floyd, folding her hands in front of her as she approached the counter. She always refused to touch anything in here, like she thought she’d contaminate the place – or like it would give her something.

Floyd bit back his annoyance, noticing Chase’s raised eyebrow from his peripheral vision. “Oh, that’s a shame. I need a few days’ notice, Mom.” *Like I’ve always told you.* “I’m going to be working this weekend, or else I could do it.”

She frowned for a few moments, then looked over at Chase. “Oh, hello! I don’t believe we’ve met before. You must be the new one, the... Chase?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Chase responded with an easygoing smile. He flipped his hair and touched it as she approached, then reached out a hand to shake.

She didn’t shake hands, just folded her hands a little closer to herself as she eyed him. “Lovely to meet you. You’re as cute as a button. I love your tattoo designs... How long have you been in training?”

Floyd rolled his eyes as she fawned over him. He was used to that guilting technique too, though he almost laughed at how conflicted Chase looked now. He indulged her, talking briefly about his Ontarian training and then how long he'd been here.

When she swept out at last, Chase waited until she was out of view before slowly turning his head to look at Floyd.

"You can say *what the fuck?* if you want," Floyd told him. "I do a lot when I'm done talking to her."

"Okay, then... what the fuck was that?" Chase exclaimed, leaning sideways against the counter to watch Floyd now. "I never... is that normal for her?" He didn't seem to know exactly what to say, but he felt passionate about whatever it was.

Floyd grimaced and looked away, automatically grabbing a rag to wipe the display cabinets. "Um... yeah, pretty much."

"Dude." Chase's voice was quieter now. "Was she trying to make nice with me to make you feel like a worse son or something?"

This much psychoanalysis was a bit heavy for noon on a Friday. Floyd flinched, then tried to control his instinctive reactions to the blunt truth. He nodded. "Probably."

"You never told me." Chase fidgeted. "And your dad...?"

"He doesn't really talk to me much. Or anyone. He's very introverted," Floyd said slowly, keeping an eye on the front door. "She sort of runs over everyone in her path."

Chase's hand was on his shoulder now, and Floyd resisted the urge to shrug it off. "Why didn't you tell me, then? You know I know all about fucked-up families."

"Yeah, no, that's just it." Floyd glanced at Chase again, his stomach twisting at the memory of the guy's face all winter, while he'd been stressing about his uber-Christian family coming to find him. "You're so much worse off. I don't have a right to complain." Chase was already looking at him like he was an idiot, and Floyd laughed sheepishly.

"Talk to me. That's what friends are for," Chase said in a tone that was firm enough to not leave any doubts in Floyd's mind. "And what about Kevin? Did you talk to him either?"

"No," Floyd admitted. "It's not like anyone can do anything."

"He could come kick her ass. Oh, sorry--" Chase started to apologize,

clearly worried he'd crossed a line.

Floyd laughed under his breath and shook his head. "It's fine, man. Just not much to be said about it. It is what it is."

Chase dropped his hand from his shoulder and watched Floyd for a moment or two, but Floyd was determined he was done. There was no sense whining about it when other people had much worse families and they still got on with everyday life. Chase, for example. Floyd admired him a lot more than he'd ever say.

"Okay," Chase concluded after a few moments, then lightly punched his shoulder. "So, Greyson's coming for you... presumably not for the first time...?" He wriggled his eyebrows.

Floyd was absolutely blushing now as he punched Chase's shoulder back, but harder. "Fucking perv."

Chase laughed, staying against the counter while Floyd went to sweep up the front floor. "I'll watch the front tonight while you work on him. Take as long as you need..." he winked.

"We're not banging in the shop."

"Mmhmm."

Floyd couldn't even meet Chase's eyes now, but he kept bursting into laughter anyway. "God, you're a dick."

"I can be," Chase agreed. "I bet he can--"

"Don't," Floyd mock-groaned, brandishing his broom at Chase until Chase held up his hands. "I don't know what... what's going on with us yet."

"Whatever it is, you look good." Chase shrugged. "Okay, I'm grabbing lunch. Be back in a few."

Floyd was a bit relieved for the moment of peace and quiet, his cheeks still hot. What was this thing between him and Greyson, anyway?

Whatever it was, he couldn't wait to see him that night.

---

"Turn your arm over for me. That's it." Floyd smoothed his thumb over the skin he was about to work on, envisioning his next lines, then got to work.

Greyson was a delight to tattoo, and not just because Floyd was so



damn stuck on him. Greyson's skin was so nice and smooth on this side, contrasting the scarred ridges on the insides of his arms. Either way, he held the ink really well, and he healed so damn fast. And he held still, and he didn't flinch away and screw up the lines.

"So you were saying about the reunion?" Greyson prompted.

Floyd hummed. "Oh, yeah. I'm not looking forward to being the sad single gay guy still stuck in his hometown..."

"Fuck, you're so much more than that."

Floyd was taken aback by the vehemence of Greyson's tone, lifting the machine for a moment as his eyes flickered up to Greyson's. Then he smiled and got back to work, trying not to waste a moment. The evening was drawing on, and this tattoo wouldn't do itself. "Thanks."

"No, man, I mean it," Greyson murmured. "You own a business now. A lot of people dream of that. And you're damn good at what you do. Your personal life is none of their business."

There was something raw about his voice, and Floyd wondered about it. Greyson hadn't exactly had an easy time through school.

"Well, you're in the same boat, right? Or are you not going to be out to them?" Floyd asked, trying to keep his tone neutral. He couldn't blame Greyson; he'd spent high school dressing, talking, walking manlier. They hadn't really talked back then, but Floyd remembered a softer, quieter, sweeter Greyson.

Before everyone else had gotten their claws in him.

Floyd grimaced, his eyes drawn back to the scars as he worked his way around the side of Greyson's arm.

"I think I will be," Greyson hummed. "Nothing to lose now, right?"

"Right." Floyd half-smiled, trying to pretend this was the first time the idea had occurred to him. "Hey, we should be fake boyfriends for each other. You know, how people arrange for dates for their reunions so they don't look desperate..."

Greyson laughed loudly, the sound ringing. "That's the most romantic proposal I've ever heard."

"Would you take me up on it if I offered seriously?" Floyd raised his eyebrows. He paused his work again to make Greyson meet his eyes.

Greyson hesitated, swallowing hard, then shook his head. It was a jerky motion – not an answer to Floyd's question, but a dismissal of

some thought of his own. "We can be fake boyfriends, sure. What the hell."

"These won't be done in time, though, unless..." Floyd trailed off.

Greyson's eyes were lit up with hope now as he tried not to twist toward Floyd, clearly hanging onto his every word.

"You want them to be?"

"At least the insides." Greyson left it unspoken why, but he didn't have to say it. Floyd wasn't stupid.

"Then I'll get the rest of it to match it. Reunion's only a couple weeks away now."

"Yeah." Greyson bit his lip.

Floyd set down the machine for a moment, counting on his fingers as he examined Greyson's arm. "Okay. So, you heal pretty fast, but I can't space them closer together. A week is already pushing it pretty hard."

Greyson nodded slowly.

"But we could do back-to-back sessions. Friday evenings and Saturday mornings. That shouldn't be too long. I couldn't make it any further apart, though. Since you heal fast, Saturday afternoon or evening you'd already be healing too much. It has to be last thing at night, first thing in the morning. Starting tomorrow, yeah?"

Greyson was nodding again, a grin on his face. "Yeah. You wouldn't mind?"

*Of course not. More time spent with you? I'd kill for that.* "Fine by me," Floyd nodded. "If I'm taking a guy to my reunion, he'd better look great on my arm."

Greyson settled back as Floyd got back to work. "I thought you were on my arm."

"I think the smaller one takes the bigger one's arm," Floyd frowned.

"Smaller in what way? Because--"

It was a credit to Floyd's training that he kept his hands steady as he flinched and laughed. "Greyson! Christ, don't distract me."

"Is thinking of my cock that distracting?"

Floyd's skin had already been prickling with pleasure at getting to touch and maul Greyson while tattooing him. Yeah, the thought of

Greyson's cock was almost enough to get him hard after all that. "Fuck off," he mumbled, focusing on the next swooping line while Greyson's deep chuckle echoed in his ears. "It'll be painful, though," Floyd murmured.

Greyson's eyes widened. "My co--"

"The tattoos!" Floyd exclaimed, laughing again. "The back-to-back sessions. Get your mind out of the gutter."

"Sorry," Greyson winked. "But no, that's fine. I'm just... thanks for doing this for me."

It was said casually, but Floyd could tell Greyson meant it. He just offered a quick smile. "No problem. Well, there won't be a problem if you shut up about your cock."

Greyson was clearly biting back a comment, and Floyd grinned. "Oh, this is gonna make for some long weekends together."

Not that he resented a single moment.

## Greyson

“Lie back and take a couple minutes.”

Greyson was happy to listen to Floyd's instructions. His arms itched fiercely with the strange sparks of pain and a dull ache like he'd been working out a little too much. It was all along the surface of his skin, though, rather than localized to a specific muscle.

And he hated to admit it, but despite being – no, *because* he was almost woozy with pain from the marathon session... He felt incredible.

It wasn't the swift, brutal, slicing pain that wrenched emotion out of numbness, but the kind of itching pain that kept him grounded, his thoughts never drifting backward to places he didn't want them to go.

*It would be so fucking weird to tell him.* Greyson resisted the urge to pick at the bandages over his arms. “Do people get off on this kind of thing?”

“Oh, yeah. Tattooing is a kink,” Floyd easily answered as he mopped down the floor. He half-grinned. “A lot of people don't mind it as much as they say. It's only awkward with guys, though.”

Greyson laughed, his shoulders settling. The easy reassurance helped him feel a little more normal. But it was the strangest knowledge, knowing that he might never feel that burn of grounding pain across his forearms again. After all, if he did it after the tattoos were done, wouldn't the ink spill out? Or if it healed, it would leave patches across the tattoos. That was the point of this: to keep himself from relapsing.

He wasn't even sure if ink could spill out like that, but he was too wary of Googling it. If it wasn't true... well, the tattoo would be pointless.

He was so wrapped up in thought that he barely noticed Floyd heading for the door. He shook himself out of the moment to stand up, making sure he had his balance and all was fine.

“Can I take you home? We'll settle up the bill tomorrow.”

The shop had closed while they were in the back room, and Chase was long gone.

Greyson smiled, stepping out from the hallway back into the main shop. "Sure." He wouldn't complain about getting laid, even if it was brief. He stepped out of the shop, too, to let Floyd activate the alarms.

Floyd joined him on the sidewalk and locked the front door, then took him by the hand.

Greyson squeezed Floyd's hand idly, then set off walking. He fully expected to invite Floyd inside and have him over – maybe even overnight this time.

They didn't say much along the way; after hours together in that little brightly-lit room, they'd said it all already. Greyson was sure Floyd's brain and hands hurt from the concentration, but he hadn't breathed a word of complaint.

"Here we go," Floyd murmured as they reached Greyson's door. He came to a halt and Greyson let go of his hand to unlock the door. When he pushed it open, Floyd didn't move to follow him.

Greyson gave him a questioning glance.

"Good night, then," Floyd nodded with a light smile, reaching out to pull Greyson back toward him.

*Oh, he doesn't want to...?* Greyson hesitated, then let Floyd pull him back onto the porch. He sidled up closer to him, sliding his arms gingerly around Floyd's waist and leaning in for a gentle kiss.

It was tender more than anything, Floyd's eyelids heavy with sleep. Greyson's anxieties settled instantly; it wasn't Floyd getting freaked out by the scars or anything. He was just tired out.

"You good for tomorrow?" Greyson pulled back enough to murmur against Floyd's soft, sweet lips.

"I'm fine for tomorrow," Floyd confirmed, smiling lightly at him. He leaned in to peck his lips again, his body warm and solid against Greyson's.

Greyson finally backed up again, his arms sliding away, then touched Floyd's arm. "Thanks for tonight."

"Thank *you*."

Floyd turned and headed down the porch stairs, then waved and said good night as Greyson headed inside.

“Good night.” Greyson closed the door after a few lingering moments of watching Floyd walk off down to the sidewalk. Then, he leaned against it and let a smile cross his face.

He'd *wanted* Floyd to stay overnight. That meant a lot more than he could explain.

---

It felt a bit like every time he blinked, Greyson was back with Floyd again. Maybe that was exhaustion talking from the late night last night, then the early morning.

He was back in the tattoo chair, and though *he'd* been the one up at six for a jog, Floyd looked far more awake than he did.

Greyson had figured he'd take ages to fall asleep with Floyd on his mind last night, but he'd wound up conking out like a light. He'd forgotten how much pain – even manageable, slight pain – tired him out. There'd been a day it was the only way he could get some sleep.

But it was a bright morning, and Greyson was able to put that out of his head easily enough.

“I need some of whatever coffee you've got,” Greyson smiled.

Floyd laughed, his eyes too focused still on Greyson's bicep as he outlined more tracing curls. “On the next break, I'll give you some.”

“How was your night, then? I assume you slept well from the spring in your step,” Greyson complained.

“You're usually the morning person,” Floyd smirked. “Did I keep you out past your bedtime?”

Greyson's cheeks were hot as he laughed. “Maybe.”

“Really?”

“Shut up,” Greyson lamented. “I like having a normal sleep schedule these days. Even if it's early.” It made a great change from his old life, where he'd been up at all hours from week to week.

“But my night was good,” Floyd answered, smiling simply. “Had a dream about an animated meadow coming to life.”

“That's very artistic.” Greyson searched his memory for dreams. “I don't remember much of mine. I was too tired out.” He cleared his throat, glancing up at Floyd for a moment. “You don't mind seeing me

twice in twenty-four hours?"

Floyd lifted the needle so he could pointedly roll his eyes. "If I minded, I wouldn't have suggested it. Stop your worrying."

"Right." Greyson felt sheepish as he laughed. "But our date tomorrow...?"

"That better still be on," Floyd threatened idly and laughed. "Or I'm going to be upset, and upset tattoo artists--"

"Yeah, it's on," Greyson quickly grinned. They shared a smile for a moment, and then Floyd got back to it, pinpricks of pain racing their way down his bicep.

"So we're basically spending the weekend together. And if you come to class today – which you should – it'll be the whole damn weekend," Greyson laughed.

Floyd hummed. "I don't know if I can keep up with the others. How fit is this class?"

"God." Greyson flipped his arm for Floyd when he asked him to. "Now you're gonna get all insecure? People of all skill levels come to classes. Everything is adapted person by person." Floyd had seemed so tentative lifting weights, like he was worried about his own strength.

In general, Floyd seemed to have trouble owning his strength. Greyson frowned at the thought.

"Right," Floyd nodded quickly. "Okay, fine, I'll come to class."

Greyson smirked. "Good."

Minutes ticked into hours until lunchtime, when they headed down to the cafe for sandwiches and coffee. Then they got back to it, working until Floyd told Greyson he literally couldn't do another minute.

"Jesus, you did more than enough," Greyson told Floyd to cut off any apologies. "That was, what, eight hours? It's been all fuckin' day!"

"Yeah," Floyd laughed quietly. "I don't do marathon sessions for just everyone."

They caught each other's eyes while Floyd disassembled the tattoo gun by touch alone. It was a quiet moment of acknowledgment.

"But I owe you for the gym training--"

"Nooo," Greyson groaned. "Oh, God, no, don't do that."

"I'm doing it." Floyd grinned stubbornly. "We're trading, like it or not."

"I want to pay you."

"I don't want you to pay me."

Greyson patted down his pockets. "Let me pay you."

"I'll bandage your hands, too, if you try."

Greyson stared. "Hey!"

Floyd winked. "Don't think I won't." Once the parts of the machine were in what looked like a sterilizing machine, he approached Greyson to bandage up his arms again, his touch skillful and light.

Even though they'd shared hours of light conversation and hours of silence, the effect Floyd had on him wasn't gone. Greyson's skin felt like it was standing in goosebumps the closer Floyd stood to him, and he couldn't tear his eyes away from Floyd's lips.

"Kiss me, then," Floyd murmured, dropping his voice to a murmur. "Since you can't stop watching me like that."

Greyson instantly obeyed, pushing himself to sit sideways on the tattoo chair with his spread legs on either side of Floyd's. He gripped Floyd's hands through the protective gloves, lacing their fingers together roughly as he leaned in and kissed Floyd in an open-mouthed promise.

Floyd moaned into his mouth, his spine curving as his shoulders sank and he pushed forward into the human contact. It must have been nice to feel after hours of one-way contact, so Greyson dropped one of Floyd's hands to gently massage the other hand with both of his own.

Floyd moaned his approval, then murmured, "Oh, s'nice."

Finding this little button of pleasure made Greyson's back straighten with pride. He could do this for him after every session, at least. He kept kissing Floyd in gentle, quiet, open-mouthed kisses, keeping himself from pressing any closer to Floyd since he didn't want to wind up fucking in the workplace. A minute or two later, he switched to rubbing the other hand until his own hands started to cramp.

"Okay," Floyd finally murmured with a breathy laugh. "I'll come to the gym for class tonight. Scram, I gotta clean up."

Greyson grinned and pushed himself to his feet, then leaned over Floyd's stool and braced his hands on each of Floyd's knees for one



more nice, slow kiss. “See you tonight.”

“See you,” Floyd murmured, then pushed his chest lightly to get him out of there. He was grinning the whole time, and Greyson's mind felt light with pleasure at the expression.

Floyd was gorgeous when he smiled like that.

Floyd

“Seriously?”

Floyd leaned back in his car seat, glaring at his phone. His arms hurt, so he had to rest his phone on the steering wheel to skim the Grindr message he'd just gotten. He was about three seconds away from deleting his profile, and this message hardly helped.

*Need a date to the reunion?*

The profile that sent the message was blank, but he knew exactly who it was: Brett, the asshole.

“Fuck you and fuck your smarmy little face.” Floyd opened the car door and climbed out, heading to his front door while doing his best to ignore the burning pain in all of his limbs, and even through his core.

Greyson hadn't been kidding when he'd promised group classes were a workout. They'd still had a lot of fun and laughter, which Floyd now suspected was a ploy to keep them working harder without noticing the pain for as long.

Oh, God, if this was what it took to get in shape, Floyd was happy to be the out-of-shape one in this relationship.

*Not relationship*, he reminded himself quickly, his breath catching in his throat. He unlocked the door to let himself inside, then gingerly bent to take off his shoes. What he had with Greyson wasn't yet... what he could call a relationship, exactly.

He *had* to ask soon.

It took him a minute to remember why his phone was in his hand. “Oh, right. That asshole.”

He opened up the app again and typed out a quick response.

*Nope, I've got one :)*

Then he put down the phone to drop off his gym clothes in the laundry basket. By the time he got back, the profile was deleted.

Floyd laughed loudly. Considering how nervous Brett had made him the first time, he wasn't taking him at all seriously this time around. What had changed?

Brett would definitely be at the reunion and jealous of Greyson. Even the prospect of facing him didn't faze Floyd right now, though. Maybe it was all the adrenaline from his workout, or the opposite – exhaustion tiring out any anxiety he might have felt. Either way, Floyd was still smiling.

He rolled his shoulders and went to grab supper, his mind racing. Between tattoos this morning and afternoon and the group workout this evening, his arms were about ready to give out. He had to be careful as he grabbed leftovers to reheate.

Floyd was loving riding high on this self-confidence, though. He'd forgotten what a fresh workout felt like and how it left the blood pumping. He'd also forgotten how much it made him want to smack a bastard down, and Brett definitely counted as one. His secret weapon was Greyson pretending to be his boyfriend, since he knew Brett would probably be afraid of facing Greyson again.

It was horrible of him to be pleased about that, since he didn't support what Greyson had done to Brett the first time around – no broken bones, but plenty of bruising. But somehow, Floyd didn't care. He was over worrying about assholes like Brett.

Floyd was much more concerned with thinking about Greyson. Bringing him as his fake boyfriend was nowhere near what he wanted.

“I'm stuck on him.”

He had to call Kevin soon. He was off on Monday and Tuesday, so surely he'd have time to talk through this with him.

But what was there to talk through?

It wasn't like he hadn't been through this before. Floyd had dated before – even if he'd chosen the wrong guys. He knew what he wanted this time around, too. He just didn't know if Greyson felt the same.

---

The lighthouse overlooking the waterfront and river was a gorgeous little spot for a date, especially on a sunny Sunday afternoon. It was even better in good company, and Floyd couldn't think of any better company than Greyson.

Every time he spent time with him, Floyd marveled over how casual it felt. It was like hanging out with a best friend, except... Best friends didn't look at each other like Floyd kept watching Greyson. He was so fucking *cute*, strong, and smart. He was the whole damn package.

Floyd even let him order a cider for him. And then several more.

"You been to the bar on the other side of the river yet?"

"Not yet," Floyd admitted with a smile. Bars weren't good places for him, in general. He'd heard about it opening, but he hadn't been. "Why?"

"We could walk over there, check it out," Greyson offered, then nodded at the glass. "Once we're done these, obviously."

"And have *more* drinks?"

Greyson laughed. "Yeah, maybe. Why not?"

"I'm gonna be falling into your bed tonight," Floyd winked. He was already pleasantly buzzed, his skin tingling.

Greyson shook his head, leaning back as he smiled at Floyd. "Nah, not tonight, on either count. Maybe soon though, hm?"

"That's... very decent of you," Floyd stuck out his lower lip as he nodded his appreciation.

Greyson laughed again. "Anyway, where was I?"

"Alberta."

"Right! When I got my first patrol there, the – the dog park incident."

Floyd leaned back with his cider, his eyes fixed on Greyson's face. He kept missing bits of his story, too fascinated by watching the way Greyson's expressions shifted as he gestured and beamed. "Uh huh," he nodded when he noticed Greyson waiting for responses.

Greyson finished his story and his cider, and Floyd laughed when he ordered one more for each of them.

Being a little tipsy, talking about stupid shit, sharing bits of their lives... He hadn't done this for years, and somehow, he liked it.

"You gonna manage?"

"I'm not drunk yet," Floyd laughed. Far from it; though his tolerance was lower than it had been years ago, he was still a big guy, and they'd been drinking slowly as they caught up on their lives. "God. I

might not be ripped, but that's just insulting."

Greyson laughed loudly. "Sorry," he apologized, then started the last drink with Floyd, reaching out to clink their glasses together.

"I haven't had this much to drink in years, though," Floyd told him, his smile fading slightly. "Other than that time with you. It... I had a bit of a problem. After... you know... things happened."

Greyson was watching him seriously now, sipping his drink and letting him continue at his own pace.

"It was pretty hard on everyone around me. But I got better, and... yeah, I don't drink on my own much anymore," Floyd laughed under his breath. That was the most he wanted to say about it anyway.

"Good for you," Greyson nodded simply.

"I don't usually like who I am when I'm drunk, but it's different around you." *Maybe I am a little more tipsy than usual.* Floyd bit his tongue, resolving not to say anything more.

Greyson grinned again, reaching out to clap his arm. "That's because I'm so awesome."

"Maybe we can do this more often. Like... a lot more often. Not *this* this," Floyd hastened to add while Greyson laughed at him. "I mean, in general."

"Are you asking me out?"

Floyd hesitated, taking a breath to clear his head. His fingers tingled where he wrapped them around the cold glass, and he rubbed lines through the condensation as he thought about his answer. *Damn it, I shouldn't have said more.* "Um... I want to. What do you think?"

Greyson blew out a quiet sigh. He didn't seem put-upon – just nervous, which was always amusing and adorable on him. He didn't tend to get scared easily, which was something Floyd had always admired about him. Of course, it also made him more likely to walk straight into the face of danger, but it got him out, too.

"I don't know," Greyson admitted honestly. "I have a lot on the go, too, and... I don't think I can be a very good boyfriend. Yet."

Floyd nodded slowly, biting back his disappointment.

"Fake boyfriend, for sure," Greyson teased to lighten the mood. Floyd let him do it and smiled in return. "You can try before you buy. And dates... I like dates."

"And tattoos, and fitness classes?" Floyd grinned.

Greyson didn't even pause a second to think about it. "Yeah."

"I'm okay with that," Floyd nodded. "So we're dating, we're just not... *dating*."

"Yeah," Greyson nodded slowly. He reached across the table to run his fingers along the tips of Floyd's, over the cool glass. The contrast in heat and cold made Floyd shiver, but he tried to let go of his desire. They definitely weren't hooking up drunk with what Greyson had said earlier.

Instead, Floyd let go of his glass and turned his hand palm-up on the table to let Greyson touch his palm and fingers.

"Brr," Greyson teased. "Did they chill yours down to freezing? God. Mine's only half that cold." He turned his palm face-up, and Floyd played along, running his fingers down across the callused palms and fingers. They laced fingers with each other for a moment, eyes locked.

Greyson's eyes were warm, and though his expression was still nervous, he had a smile on his face he couldn't seem to wipe away.

Floyd felt just the same.

"We should get going, then," Floyd finally said, pulling away from Greyson's touch to finish his cider before he rose to his feet.

As natural as breathing, Greyson's hand slipped into Floyd's when they walked down the sidewalk from the restaurant toward their houses.

When it was time for them to part ways, Greyson's house a few minutes' walk in one direction while Floyd's apartment building was several minutes the other, they both paused on the sidewalk and turned to each other.

"I'm really glad you told me that," Greyson said quietly, and Floyd didn't have to ask what he meant. "Thank you."

"Thank you for bringing up the dating thing," Floyd countered. "We'll... talk more about it as things go on, eh?"

"Yeah."

Floyd made himself let go of Greyson's hand at last. He leaned in, cupping Greyson's cheek for a nice, sweet goodbye kiss before they waved and went on their separate ways.

It was easy to fall into Greyson's company, but it was getting harder

each time for Floyd to tear himself away.

Kevin

It was weird not to be waiting at the baggage claim for his stick. With just his backpack, Kevin walked straight out of the arrivals gate, glancing around for Cam.

“Hey, ugly mug.”

Kevin laughed and spotted Cam instantly with the verbal cue, a head above the others he was standing near. “Gee, thanks.” He strode up to Cam for a tight, back-slapping hug, then pulled back. “Long time no see, huh?”

“Only a month,” Cam grinned. “Wait 'til game season starts. You'll be up and down the goddamn continent more than... well.” He couldn't finish that metaphor in public.

Kevin laughed and let go of Cam, then punched his arm. “You're looking great.”

“You, too, though. Considering. You're bulking up, too,” Cam complimented, looking him up and down. “Trainer got you working out more?”

Kevin groaned. He didn't even have to tell Cam, who used to get coached by the same guy, what the man put them all through. He was demanding, but in a good way – the kind of guy who wanted you to be your best.

“Come on, I'm parked over here.”

As they walked, Kevin elbowed Cam. “So, things are going good?”

“Great,” Cam nodded. “Noah's... well. Noah's good.” The way he glowed when he talked about his boyfriend was sweet, even if it made Kevin's heart hurt a little with jealousy.

“That's informative. Thanks.”

“You're welcome.” Cam gave him an obnoxious grin, then sobered up a little. “You wanted to come check on Floyd?”

“Yeah, he's... He's been weird lately, even over the phone.” But this was more than helping Floyd out. Kevin needed a break himself from



the intensity of... well... everything. Kevin didn't care if he spent his precious break mostly on planes, as long as he got to see his friends and family again for a bit. Even for half a day each.

"He has," Cam agreed with a nod. "I think he's in love."

Kevin stopped dead, his hand on the car handle. "What?"

"He hasn't told you?"

"He's been really cagey," Kevin frowned, then climbed in as Cam did. How come he'd told Cam and not him? Was something wrong? God, he hoped Floyd wasn't crushing on him or something.

Cam nodded. "He has been with us, too, but he's been mentioning a lot about this guy, a former friend of his. We had him over for a barbecue and he seems really cool, though."

"What's the guy's name?"

"Greyson."

Kevin recognized it, but he couldn't place it exactly. Maybe from school. "Okay, cool. Wow. That's a lot better than I was worrying about."

"Why, what were you worried about?"

"His parents are... well. Pretty weird." Kevin wasn't sure how much he should say, but that much at least seemed safe.

Cam frowned. "Really?"

"For sure. His mom especially."

Cam hummed as he drove through the woods toward town, keeping an eye out for wild animals. "So how's training going? What do they have you doing?"

Kevin was glad to change the subject and talk in detail about hockey instead of Floyd, but he was also painfully aware of Cam's interest in it. His buddy had to be at least a little jealous, even if he hid it well. A sudden medical condition taking him out was any guy's worst nightmare, let alone one who was just about to get the contract of his life.

As they reached the outskirts of town, marked by a huge bridge passing overhead, Kevin glanced at Cam again. "Is Floyd working today?"

"I asked Chase and he didn't think so. Why?"

“We could drop by and surprise him.” Cam was probably Kevin's other closest friend, so they could stage an intervention if they had to.

Cam laughed. “That'll be a hell of a surprise, but sure. Did you tell him at all you were coming out?”

“Nope,” Kevin grinned.

When they pulled up in front of Floyd's apartment, Kevin left his backpack in the car and headed up to the door, squinting at the buzzers until he found Floyd's.

“Hello?”

“Hey, man,” Cam spoke up. “It's Cam. You in? Now a good time to drop by?”

“Oh yeah, yeah. Come on in.”

The buzzer rang off and the door clicked open.

Kevin grinned at Cam and pulled open the door, waiting for the elevator with him. “Nicely done.”

“Thanks.”

They headed up in the elevator. By the time the elevator door opened, Floyd had his apartment door open and was leaning in the frame. “Hey, Ca-holy shit! Kev?”

“Hey, man,” Kevin beamed at Floyd, striding forward for a quick, tight hug and slapping him on his back. “They gave us two days off, so I'm here 'til tomorrow morning.”

“Oh my God, man, you could've told me!” Floyd laughed. He slapped Kevin's back and then held his door open for both Cam and Kevin to get in, clapping Cam's arm as well.

“Nah, I wanted to surprise you.”

“Well, you did,” Floyd laughed. Floyd's face was a little more taut, like he was wound up about something but trying to put it aside for the sake of the visit.

Kevin nodded. “How have you been? You're cagey as shit on the phone. Be real.”

Floyd opened his mouth, then closed it again and nodded slowly. He seemed uncertain about exactly what to say, but he let out a quiet breath. “Basically... there's this guy.”

“Oho,” Kevin clapped his hands together and leaned forward. “I knew it.”

Floyd groaned. “Fuck off. Anyway, he has... his own kind of problems.”

“Like all of us,” Cam supplied.

Floyd conceded that one with a shrug. “Yeah. But it's making him think he wouldn't be a good boyfriend.”

*He wants to date the guy? Holy shit.* Kevin grinned. “On the good news, he wants to be your boyfriend other than that, huh?”

Floyd flopped on the couch, and Cam and Kevin followed suit, flanking him. “Yeah, I think,” Floyd admitted.

“So what's the problem? You think he's not committed?” Cam asked, leaning back and folding his arms.

“You guys want a pop or something?” Floyd offered, but Kevin grabbed his shoulder.

“Sure, but hold on, hold on. Don't run so fast,” Kevin laughed. “I know that face.” Floyd always had a certain look when he was trying to escape a tricky conversation.

Floyd grimaced but stayed sitting down. “Fine. Yeah. I just think he feels like he has to be perfect. He's really... hard on himself.”

“So have you told him you like him the way he is? Or love him?” Kevin asked, watching Floyd closely.

Floyd caught his breath, but the moment of stunned silence said it all.

“You do,” Kevin murmured, raising his brows. “Jesus. That's fast.”

Floyd heaved himself to his feet to go grab pop, his hands fidgeting anxiously. Kevin didn't follow, just cast a quick glance at Cam and stayed where he was to give him a bit of space. “Yeah, I know,” Floyd told them from the kitchen.

“So have you told him? Either of those things?”

Floyd shook his head, handing over a can of pop to each of them and cracking his own as he sank down onto the coffee table, sitting facing them both. “Not yet.” He took the first sip carefully.

Cam nodded. “So just fuckin' tell him.”

“But--” Floyd started.

“He’s going to argue it,” Kevin laughed, kicking Floyd’s knee lightly as he looked at Cam. “Not everyone is blunt. And I seem to remember *you* didn’t tell Noah everything--”

“Shut up,” Cam groaned. “Point is, get it out now. I wish I’d said more, earlier.”

Floyd frowned. He was taking Cam’s advice, but something still bothered him. “And if he just thinks I’m a fling? We have to spend a lot of time together over the next few weeks...”

“Suck it up, princess,” Cam snorted. “Put up or shut up.”

Kevin heard Coach Walker in his voice and laughed.

Floyd joined in the laugh a moment later and shook his head as he sipped. “Yeah. Guess you’re right, huh? Anyway – what the fuck are *you* doing here?” he addressed Kevin, relaxing and grinning at him.

Kevin rolled his eyes. “I got a couple days off for good behavior, and I thought I’d come visit my family and friends like a sentimental asshole.”

“Aww, how sweet,” Floyd grinned. “If I’d known, we could have done a party tonight. Wait, did you know?”

“Only a couple days ago,” Cam shook his head. “I can confirm that it wasn’t a premeditated plan,” he laughed. “But he’s coming over for a couple beers tonight if you wanna come,” he offered Floyd.

Kevin glanced at Floyd. From what he knew, he wasn’t much for drinking, but he did hope he came just to get a better chance to talk to him.

“I’ve got supper with my parents...” Floyd trailed off, then frowned. “I can get away early, yeah.”

“After supper? I’m having supper with my family, too.” Kevin punched Floyd’s arm lightly. “Hey, man, about that...” There was no easy way to say it. “You doing all right with them?”

“Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah... Yeah.” Floyd gulped his pop and nodded again.

Cam burst out laughing. “Well, that’s convincing.”

Floyd’s cheeks flushed and he scuffed a foot on the floor in an anxious tic. “Jesus, is it waterboard-Floyd-day today?”

“I’m just saying, man, things seem pretty shitty. If you need anything,

bro..." Kevin shook his head. "Man, my mom would be there."

"Or mine," Cam nodded. "She's only met you, like, twice, but she'd trade you for me, I'm sure."

That made Floyd laugh, at least. "Thanks. Yeah, it's... it's nice to be welcomed into the family. It's so easy to be around you guys."

Kevin smiled over at Cam, jerking his chin toward him. "Yeah, I know."

Cam just gave a broad shrug. "Of course. Anyway, finish your pop," he told Kevin, jerking his thumb toward the window. "Speaking of family, I gotta get you to your parents' place. I think they'll wanna see you."

"Awesome." Kevin gulped down the last of the pop, then set aside the can and stood up again. "See you tonight, right?" he addressed Floyd as Floyd stood, too.

"Of course. Tonight, man."

"See you, bro."

Kevin shook his head as he pulled his shoes back on to follow Cam to his car to go see his parents. Floyd was in love, Cam was in love – actually, all the Rileys now... At this rate, there wouldn't be a single guy left in their group except him.

## Greyson

"You said before that you met someone you like – and now you're seeing them?"

"Him," Greyson corrected, his jaw firm.

Greyson's mother nodded slightly. "We just wanted you to know that we worry about you."

All parents did, but sometimes it didn't feel like Greyson's parents' concern came from anywhere good. At least they were acknowledging his corrections, even if they shouldn't have been needed.

"But you're not in Alberta anymore. Things are a lot slower to change around here," his father spoke up.

Greyson squinted, trying to figure out what that meant. "So...?"

"So... well..." They exchanged looks. "The more sensitive you are, the harder it will be to get past whatever you went through before."

"Are you..." Greyson trailed off. "What?"

"We understand being a police officer is hard," his mother interrupted. "But refusing to rejoin just because of what happened here last time--"

"Mom." That stopped her, and they both watched him from the couch. Greyson rubbed his forehead as he leaned back in the armchair. They knew he'd been involved in an off-duty incident. He might have implied that it was with a known troublemaker – which it was – and that he'd been targeted because he was a cop. Not that he'd gone to enforce vigilante justice on an asshole who was never going to be picked up by the system.

As always, his mistruths came back to bite him in the ass.

"We just worry that you're drifting back to being... well..."

"Girly?" Greyson raised his eyebrow, folding his arms just to subtly highlight his biceps. He'd recently switched to more upper body training.

"No. Just..."

"The kid who got picked on all through grade school? Yeah, I'm not that guy anymore," Greyson told them. Far from it. It was like they didn't even know him. God knew what image of him they really had.

"No, but life would be a lot easier..."

"Yeah, it would," Greyson agreed with his dad. "Yeah, I know being a fitness instructor is gayer than being a cop. And I know some people will have a problem with me, but I'm more than equipped to handle those guys now. And yeah, I went through... crap... before, in Alberta and here. But I'm not becoming a sensitive little pansy--" *like you're afraid of, Dad*, "--just because I'm dating a man. You have... a lot of... mixed-up ideas."

They considered that for a moment before Greyson's mother nodded. "I suppose we do. We just don't know how to have a..."

"Gay son?"

"Yes."

Greyson half-smiled. "You just listen to me, support me when I bring someone home, stand up for me when your friends say homophobic things, and respect me like you would if I were the 200-pound cop still, dating women and seeming happy."

"But you *are* happier now?" his mother asked, and his father watched him closely. He could tell they weren't sure *how*, exactly, hence the question.

"Duh," Greyson smiled, leaning back again and unfolding his arms. *I mean, technically, I am. I'm a little healthier.* "I'm dealing with all my crap. I just need to... not get unsolicited advice. And no matter how much I miss it, I can't do my old job anymore. It brings up too much for me."

"I just wish we could've protected you better--"

Greyson stood up to sit next to his mother, taking her hand and squeezing it. "Mom. Kids will be kids. You couldn't keep me safe from everyone. But I learned to keep myself safe." And yeah, part of that was squashing down everything until he hummed with the need to feel something, but he'd done what he'd had to then, too.

And now he was dealing with his shit.

"In fact," Greyson spoke up with a light smile to interrupt her guilt, "the guy I'm seeing knows a lot of the past stuff going on with me and he still wants to be around me."

“Good. He wouldn't be worth being around if he didn't,” his father said firmly.

Greyson almost flinched from surprise. He hadn't expected that much passion in his dad's voice, let alone using *those* pronouns. “I... yeah.”

Yeah, Floyd knew a lot about him, and that made him a little uncomfortable. But it ensured that he couldn't hide from his issues anymore, and maybe that was healthy.

And Floyd wanted to date him. He'd hinted that at the lighthouse restaurant.

*I could date him, if he can put up with me.*

Greyson moved to hug his mother, then nodded at his dad. At least they were on his side after all.



## Floyd

At first, Floyd didn't remember why his hands were stiff and his stomach jittered with nerves as he rolled over slowly in bed, stretching.

Then, he yawned, a smile spreading over his face. A marathon session of tattooing left his hands feeling a little sore the next day, but he soaked them in warm water, rubbed lotion in, and they were usually good to go again. Then again, two back-to-back marathons? He'd never done this for any other guy, and he didn't think he'd want to again.

But this was his last tattoo session with Greyson. They'd get it done with a couple weeks before the reunion for the tattoos to properly heal, and then... well, he'd look some hot in his short-sleeved shirt. Whether he was Floyd's boyfriend by then or not.

Yesterday's session had felt so utterly comfortable he hadn't felt the need to bring up their relationship status yet. But now that the work was almost over, he had to. They were two weeks away from the reunion, and the more he thought about it, the more Floyd knew he didn't want to go as *fake* boyfriends.

He had to tell Greyson he didn't care what kind of issues he had going on, he'd date the *fuck* out of him. Or something like that. The good-night kiss had been longer than usual this time, and the way Greyson watched him...

"Tell me I'm not going crazy," Floyd groaned to the empty air of the bedroom, pulling the pillow over his face.

"I don't know if you are--"

"What the *fuck*?" Floyd exclaimed, sitting bolt-upright as he heard a woman's voice from outside the bedroom. Then, not even a second later, he recognized it. "*Mom?!!*"

"I don't know why you're lying in when the church lunch preparation has long since started--"

"What?" Floyd threw the covers off, his nerves sparking in anger.

“Wait, no.” He stepped into jeans and pulled on a t-shirt, brushing his hands vigorously back and forth through his hair a few times to try to tame the bedhead.

Then, he threw open his bedroom door.

His mother stood there, clearly dressed for church. Her brows drew together as she gave a disapproving tut. “That’s hardly appropriate. And neither is that language, young man.”

“You’re--” Floyd was genuinely worried for her mental health now. It was like she was in her own house, not *his* goddamn place. “That’s--stop. Just stop. What are you doing in *my* place? Is this an emergency?”

“Well, I assumed you would be helping this weekend in lieu of last weekend, when you were apparently too busy for me.”

“No. No. That’s not how that works. You never gave me warning last time or even asked me this time,” Floyd told her heatedly. It was too early in the morning for him to have his guard up against drama, and he was sick and tired of this shit.

“Oh. So you’re going to go your own way again?” She straightened up, shouldering her purse. “Never lifting a finger to help your own family, only concerned with your own selfish interests?”

“My own-- Mom, you literally didn’t tell me you wanted me to help this weekend-- no, let me finish! To help this weekend. Then you use my spare key, I’m assuming, since you can’t kick a door down in that dress without making a racket. Without my permission. If I’d had my boyfriend--”

“Your *what*?”

Silence ticked by for a few seconds as Floyd stared pointedly at her. Sure, Greyson technically wasn’t – *yet*, he tried not to think – but the point was still valid.

“I can’t believe you wouldn’t tell me this.”

Floyd huffed out a sigh of annoyance.

“So this is why you’re suddenly so unhelpful. Well, it’s better than the booze, I suppose. Marginally.” She turned around and marched for the front door, Floyd following close behind to open it for her. “Let me know when you’re ready to make good on your promise of doing better.”

*She doesn’t care about me.* The realization was a punch to the gut. *She*

*cares about making me do what she wants me to.*

It wasn't like Floyd hadn't known that for years.

But now... something about the stark shift in her attitude made him see it more clearly than ever. She hadn't even paused to ask who it was. She'd instantly pulled out her ultimate weapon – his past – and tried to make it about her.

He was done trying to impress people who didn't care. He'd stopped owing her favors and apologies years ago.

“I'll take the key.” She silently pressed it into his hand. “Bye, Mom. I'll call you.”

She was out the door in seconds, too deep in one of her self-righteous rage fits to say goodbye as she marched down the apartment hall to the parking lot. Someone was in the driver's seat of her car – presumably his dad.

Floyd glowered at the door lock as if it had personally betrayed him by letting her in this morning, then closed the door hard and leaned on it.

Christ. Not even in his own home was he safe from that woman. And his dad didn't seem to give a damn. He never once spoke up to ask if she was being reasonable, or to defend Floyd. Did they both think he was a good-for-nothing dropout cop on the bottle?

Well... no sense standing about moping. He had a job to do: one of the most important jobs he'd ever done.

Greyson's self-confidence rested on Floyd's shoulders right now, and Floyd was going to do his damndest to help.

---

“So, I think we should talk.” Floyd leaned over his coffee and sandwich, ignoring the hustle and bustle of the café at lunchtime.

The morning had been as peaceful as yesterday, and setting aside his own grim thoughts for a few hours had been most welcome. They'd both needed a break and lunch before they kept going, though, so they were here again. The baristas were starting to recognize them.

“I agree,” Greyson said seriously, putting down the crust of his sandwich and pushing his plate aside. “You go first.”

Floyd's anxiety ratcheted up a notch, but he tried to ignore it. *I need to*

*take the risk that I could hurt him. I **can** hurt people, and I can let them help me with whatever I'm dealing with.* He drew a breath and let it out, then sipped his coffee and cleared his throat.

"I just wanted to say... I know you've got your own stresses, but man, I don't care."

Greyson looked taken aback as he leaned back, his hands wrapped around his cup. "You what?"

"I mean, I *care*," Floyd hastily continued. "Of course. No, I mean... um..." His cheeks flushed as Greyson started to smirk.

That goddamn smirk. There it was again – the cocky bit of him. The bit of him who'd acted like he deserved a thanks for punching Floyd's asshole ex in the face.

He kind of liked that bit.

Floyd rubbed his face. "Stop looking at me like that. I like you, okay? Let's be adults about this. I like you, and I don't care if you're a little screwed-up--"

Greyson flinched but nodded slightly.

--sorry, but you know what I mean. Cause I am, too. And I've been worried that..." Floyd trailed off, grimacing.

"That what?"

"That I'll hurt you. I keep letting everyone around me down," Floyd told him quietly, warming his hands on his mug to soothe the ache.

"You haven't let me down," Greyson shook his head. "You've come through for me. For my part, I've been holding off telling you because of all this--"

"The tattoo sessions?"

"Yeah. Forty hours of awkwardness--"

"*Right?!*" Floyd exclaimed, his laugh ringing out and startling even himself. Thank God Greyson had been worried about the same stupid little stuff. "All day trying to pretend we're not crazy into each other..."

"We are," Greyson agreed, and Floyd couldn't look away from those enchanting dark eyes. "I have been for... a long time. I think back then, when I stood up for you..."

Floyd's brows shot up. "You crushed on me back *then*?"

Now Greyson looked embarrassed as he set down his cup with a loud *clunk* against the table. "Maybe. Anyway, that's beside the point! Let's get out of here."

"I think it's very relevant," Floyd smirked. He loved cracking through that confident, cool attitude to the embarrassed little nerd Greyson kept so well-hidden. He stood up, following Greyson out into the rainy afternoon.

Before he could set off in a brisk stride just down the street to his shop almost next door, Greyson grabbed his arm to hold him back. "I'm trying to ask you something," Greyson laughed, his cheeks red. "Without other people around."

"Go ahead." Floyd was getting rained on, but Greyson... looked like he had something to say. He paused and turned back to face Greyson.

"Do you want to date? For real?"

*Oh, wow.* Floyd hadn't expected to hear that from Greyson, and he knew his shock registered easily on his face. "You-- really? What's changed? You really want to?"

Greyson gave him a *duh* look. "No, it's sarcasm. Of course I want to date you. I... thought more about it, that's all."

Floyd laughed. It was his turn for embarrassment again as he stared down for a moment, then shook his head slowly as he looked back up at Greyson, a smile crossing his lips. "I was just worried you were putting up with me until the tattoos were done--"

Greyson stepped forward, grabbing his cheeks and hauling him in for a kiss.

Someone nearby wolf-whistled, and Floyd nearly burst out laughing against Greyson's soft lips. It was *wonderful* to kiss him in the warm summer rain, as much of a fucking stereotype as that was. And they didn't have to damn well hide down alleys to do it. If he wanted to kiss Greyson right here in the middle of the sidewalk, he could do it.

Floyd kissed Greyson back just as hard, his hands rising to grip Greyson's hips. He pulled him in against him, their fronts pressing warmly together as their lips slid against each other's. Floyd's chest burned with warmth at Greyson's impulsive, passionate move.

He loved Greyson's impulsive, passionate side. He didn't love the trouble it got him into sometimes, but Christ, he could deal with that if Greyson could deal with Floyd's asshole past – and assholes from his past.

Something told him Greyson would love to see Brett again anyway.

“Okay,” Greyson gasped a moment later, pulling back from his new boyfriend with a laugh. “We should get in before we're too wet.”

“Among other things,” Floyd murmured, a smile spreading across his lips as he led Greyson by the hand to the tattoo shop.

He loved the way Chase's eyes flickered between them as they trotted into the shop together, Greyson going first and pulling Floyd in out of the rain.

“Welcome back,” Chase smirked. “I see you had a good lunch.”

Floyd knew he was glowing, but he flipped Chase the middle finger. “Shut up.”

“Have fun back there,” Chase added anyway, leaning on his elbows on the counter and giving them an even broader grin.

Greyson shook his head and followed Floyd into the back room again. The way Greyson watched Floyd as he shrugged off his shirt and the light bandages made Floyd's cheeks flush, but he focused on reloading the ink cartridge.

Maybe for the last time.

“Okay,” Floyd laughed as he took a seat on the stool and rolled toward Greyson. “You're gonna have to stop watching me like that.”

“Like what?” Greyson was obnoxiously grinning.

“Like *that*,” Floyd laughed. “Let me finish my goddamn work unless you want these feathers to be all crooked.”

“Will I embarrass you?”

“Oh, I picked an asshole,” Floyd groaned, wiping down Greyson's arm with sanitizer.

Greyson snickered. “You know me.”

“I do.” Floyd glanced up at him. “How about we spend tomorrow together, though...?” He wasn't sure Greyson would want him to stay overnight yet – he did seem to have issues with that – but he could do this, at least.

“How about tonight?”

Floyd met Greyson's eyes. They were as warm as his smile. Greyson leaned up for an impulsive peck on Floyd's lips, then lowered himself

back onto the tattoo chair.

Floyd leaned down to return the peck. “God, yes,” he murmured. Greyson was finally letting him in, and... well, he didn't have time to get emotional about it. He pulled back again to grab gloves. “Now stop watching me.”

Greyson laughed but didn't protest, settling back and closing his eyes as he stretched out his bare arm. His body was totally relaxed under the bright lights, his fingers lightly curled up. It was the ultimate display of trust, and Floyd's whole chest warmed up.

Tonight.

He'd tell Greyson everything tonight, and maybe he'd learn a little more, too. Or maybe it would be gradual. Maybe Greyson would never want to talk about some of the things that plagued him.

That was fine, too.

Floyd would take this man however he wanted to give himself to him, and he'd love him just as much no matter what.

The gun buzzed in his hand, and Floyd brought his keen focus to hone in on the next hundred dots he had to imprint on Greyson's skin.

## Greyson

Floyd's lips were soft, his hands gentle as they cupped Greyson's cheek and side. Greyson's arms stung, and for the first time in a long time, he didn't crave even more sensation.

He actually didn't like the sting across his inner arms, along the scar tissue, and down to his wrist.

"Don't bump against the wall," Floyd murmured, and Greyson laughed quietly as they moved out of the foyer toward the staircase.

"I can handle a little bump."

"Hey. Not on my fresh art," Floyd clicked his tongue.

Greyson laughed, taking Floyd by the hand to lead him upstairs. He'd bumped his arms a few times when they went to grab supper before heading home, and during the subsequent drink. A cider each, a pizza to share, and God, he loved being around Floyd.

When the bedroom door clicked shut behind him, he let Floyd push him over toward the bed, grinning as he walked backward. Just before he fell, he hooked his fingers through Floyd's belt loops to yank him down with him.

"Ooh!" Floyd laughed, shifting and squirming against him as their torsos rubbed together, legs tangling. They both laughed then, pulling their feet free so that Floyd could straddle him.

Greyson loved having Floyd on top of him, all six-foot-something of him. Especially when he was unbuttoning his shirt and shoving it off, showing off the tattoos along his stomach and sides and shoulders and arms...

He was fucking gorgeous. Greyson wondered why he didn't have tattoos across his chest yet, but he could ask another time.

"Careful," Floyd murmured, tossing his shirt aside and unbuttoning Greyson's to see his chest and torso. "I'll leave your shirt on to keep an extra layer of protection."

"You have to be so fuckin' sweet?" Greyson grumbled.



“I know, right? I should be an asshole and make you lift me off the ground and fuck me.”

Greyson winced at the idea of every inch of his arms being wrapped around Floyd's thighs and up his back, supporting his weight. *That* part was hot, but on freshly-tattooed skin? “Ouch. But once my arms heal...”

“Oh, God, yes.” Floyd braced himself over Greyson, one tattooed arm on either side of his head as he leaned down to press their lips together again.

It was the easiest thing in the world to fall into bed with Floyd, flirting and teasing the whole damn time like they weren't already about to fuck.

Or maybe make love.

Floyd's touch was tender as he pulled Greyson's jeans and underwear off, scooting down the bed while staying careful not to touch Greyson's arms.

Greyson splayed his arms out so that wouldn't be a problem, grinning as Floyd's gaze wandered up his body from his half-hard cock to his chest, then his face. “You like the results of all my crunches?”

“Do I ever.”

Floyd leaned down to press a few light kisses along the skin revealed by his unbuttoned shirt – along the chest, under a nipple, then along his ribs and down his stomach, over his rippling abs, to his hip.

“Mmm,” Greyson moaned quietly, and then Floyd's mouth was around his cock, sucking in a few gentle teases before Floyd pulled away. “Oh, you motherfuckin' tease.”

Floyd laughed and winked up the length of his body. He pressed one more smooch to the tip. “I'll make up for it.”

“You'd better fuck me like nothing else,” Greyson idly threatened, spreading his legs further apart and grinning.

Floyd's eyes widened for a moment. “You want that? Oh, God, yes.”

“I'm... flexible,” Greyson teased, then winked. “In multiple ways.”

Floyd was already grabbing for a condom and lube, and Greyson laughed at the urgency he suddenly had.

Greyson couldn't stop watching Floyd's eyes as Floyd cracked open the

lube. Then, those sweet eyes rose to lock on his own, watching him with concern and care.

Fingers pushed inside and Greyson breathed out, his stomach tightening. "Hnnh."

"Oh, you're so hot." Greyson couldn't look away from Floyd even as Floyd's fingers pushed further inside, warming and filling and lightly stretching him. More importantly, those fingers stroked along his prostate with a distinctive little jolt of pleasure that turned into a slightly stronger one.

Within a minute, Greyson was moaning and writhing against the covers, his head rolling back as his back arched off the bed. The fingers pulled out, leaving him disappointingly empty until the condom-clad tip pressed at his opening.

Floyd knelt between his legs as he pushed in, then grabbed Greyson's thighs and hauled them up his lap.

"Yes," Greyson moaned, wrapping his legs around Floyd's waist as the thick warmth pushed slowly inside him, inch by goddamn inch.

Oh, God, that felt incredible. He'd almost forgotten how *good* a hot cock inside him could be!

And then Floyd was setting into motion with quick, skilled thrusts of his hips, filling Greyson deeply each time. Greyson's back arched again and he gasped as the head of that thick cock rubbed against his prostate, making his whole body tense and his cock harden even more.

He pulsed with pleasure already, his muscles twitching.

And when he opened his eyes, Floyd was still watching, his eyes dark with arousal and lips curled up in a beautiful little smile.

Greyson moaned and grabbed Floyd's shoulders, letting his legs slide away from Floyd's waist so he could pull Floyd against him.

Their bodies crashed together in a wave of warmth and passion, nipples brushing nipples as Floyd's hot, heavy weight blanketed Greyson. Greyson arched up against him and kissed him hard, panting his arousal into his mouth.

"You're so fucking hot," Floyd moaned, his voice already strained as he fucked Greyson into the mattress just as hard and fast as Greyson had asked of him.

"Christ, so are you!" Greyson managed. His body throbbed with

pleasure, the rhythm pulling him along in his pleasure. All he could do was fumble between them for his own cock and jerk it off.

Floyd pushed his hand away to take over the job, stroking him at the same quick, hard pace his cock pounded into him...

And yet, they couldn't seem to look away from each other. Something wild and magnetic and absolutely impossible to escape was in their locked gazes, deep in Floyd's eyes.

It was unmistakable, but Greyson didn't dare breathe it out. They'd known each other years ago, and only a few weeks this time around. It was too soon.

The thought was driven from his eyes moments later as his whole body pulsed and shivered. He was so fucking close...

"Fuck, yes!" Greyson moaned. He didn't care that his arms stung as he pulled Floyd's back close to him, his arms wrapped around Floyd's waist to keep their weight together like they could meld together.

And then he was spilling over the edge into hot, raw-edged pleasure that tore a cry of arousal from his throat. His body squeezed and pulsed and pleasure spilled from him as he writhed against the pillow. Floyd's lips only pressed against his throat and collarbone to set his nerves even more on edge, making him thrust his hips forward into Floyd's fist.

"F-Floyd! Yes! Hnnh...!"

"Y-Yeah!" Floyd grunted, his cock stuttering to a halt for a moment deep within Greyson before he was fucking him again, the bed surely close to creaking with the force. These thrusts were unconscious, full of pleasure spilling from him and caught by the condom.

But Greyson did get to enjoy the expressions of unashamed, unfiltered pleasure that crossed Floyd's face.

He pressed kisses against Floyd's lips until Floyd's eyes cleared of their orgasmic haze and he could focus on Greyson's face again.

"Hey," Greyson smirked. "You were a long way away just there."

"No," Floyd murmured, his voice deep and sincere as he slowly pulled out and flopped against Greyson to let them recover. "I was right here."

Greyson's heart clenched and he ran his hand slowly up Floyd's back as Floyd held him close. They were gazing into each other's eyes again, neither of them saying a word.

A long minute later, an abrupt smile crossed Floyd's lips and he finally broke the gaze with a little laugh, pulling Greyson in and rolling onto his side.

Greyson let Floyd pull him in against his chest, not complaining for a moment about those arms being wrapped around him. He still ached with pleasure and the faint desire to be fucked again, but he could wait until morning for that.

God, he was tired. It was probably the constant pain and the long day of doing nothing, lying perfectly still in the tattoo chair. He'd cashed in a couple favors to get someone to cover his weekend classes, but even that was worth it.

He'd do anything to be around Floyd.

Greyson tingled with the pleasurable warmth and closeness, his eyes drifting shut. The soft breaths exhaled against the back of his neck were the last thing he felt before sleep.

---

The smell of eggs hit Greyson's nose at about the same second his stomach rumbled. He stretched and rolled in bed before he forcing himself to get up and dressed.

When Greyson peeked around the kitchen corner, he had to smile. Floyd was singing under his breath as he cooked eggs and pancakes. He actually shimmied on the spot, too, brandishing a fork like a baton.

“Morning.”

“Oh!” Floyd jumped, then laughed, putting down the fork. “Good morning. I didn't even hear you. Stealthy.”

“You *have* lost all the old skills,” Greyson half-smiled. He knew better than to tease Floyd much about it, given his feelings about their past life, but he thought he'd earned a bit of leeway by now.

Floyd clicked his tongue but smiled. “Thank God.”

Greyson knew what he meant. Frankly, he was a bit jealous. He'd take a little relaxation over having to sit facing every door and eying every passerby twice. “What's to eat?”

“Eggs and pancakes. You're out of bacon,” Floyd chuckled. “You hungry?”

“Starved.” Greyson sat at the table, fidgeting with his utensils.

“Thanks for breakfast.”

“Don't thank me 'til you know if the pancakes are any good. It's kind of hard to screw up eggs, though.”

“Long as you don't put milk in them,” Greyson nodded.

Floyd looked guiltily up at him.

“No,” Greyson gasped and laughed. “Oh, man, you don't.”

“I always have!”

Greyson laughed richly and shrugged. “Fine. If there's enough ketchup.”

Floyd brought that to the table, then their plates of food.

Greyson stopped him by grabbing his collar before he could pull back and get them drinks. He leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to Floyd's lips.

Floyd cupped his cheek and kissed him back, his lips tasting faintly minty. Mmm, fresh and tasty. Then, Floyd pulled back and winked. “Juice?”

“Yeah,” Greyson agreed without even thinking. He'd have preferred coffee, but Floyd brought over what looked like fresh-pressed apple juice and he forgot about that instantly. The thought of coffee made him remember that he had to get in touch with Darren and Lyle, though. They'd been oddly quiet.

Floyd gathered their dishes after they ate, then waved his hand at Greyson. “Go to the bathroom and grab your tattoo lotion. It's the one that looks like lube but isn't.”

Greyson laughed. “What if I grab the lube?” he winked.

“That depends,” Floyd smirked. Then his face fell. “But I gotta work today.”

Greyson groaned. “Me too. I was trying to forget that.” He headed to the bathroom to grab the white bottle, and when he came out, Floyd was sitting on the couch.

“Off with your shirt,” Floyd grinned.

“I think I *did* grab the wrong one,” Greyson smirked as he flopped next to Floyd and yanked off his shirt. He winced when fabric slid over his skin.

Floyd smoothed the lotion over his fingers, then spread it across Greyson's skin starting at his shoulders.

Oh, the cooling lotion slicked into his stinging skin felt like heaven. Greyson resisted a moan of pleasure but breathed out a pleased little sigh.

"Good, huh?" Floyd chuckled quietly. "That feeling never quite gets old. You're already healing well. The flaking will start soon, though."

"I can handle that," Greyson assured him. "I'm used to it now."

"Oooh." Floyd took one of Greyson's arms into his lap to smooth the lotion across his forearm, effortlessly running his palm over the inside and outsides to rub lotion down to his wrist. "Look who's an expert now."

Greyson laughed quietly, gazing up at Floyd as he worked. The tender care with which his hands moved made him smile. "My parents are coming around, you know."

"Yeah?" Floyd murmured, pausing for a moment before he rubbed back up to Greyson's bicep and up to his shoulder, then patted him to get him to give him his other arm.

"Mmhmm." Greyson didn't want to brag, but it was true. "And yours...?"

Floyd winced.

"Sorry." *Is this too fast?*

"No, it's – it's okay." Floyd cleared his throat. "Um, I don't know if I can... be around them right now."

Greyson sharply looked from Floyd's hand up to his face, but Floyd was watching his own hands work across Greyson's inner arm. "Oh."

Floyd was quiet until he worked the lotion in all the way up to Greyson's arm. There was a lot he wasn't saying right now. Greyson knew exactly what that expression looked like, and what it felt like inside him, too.

Pain or not, Greyson slipped his arms around Floyd's waist and pulled him in for a silent hug. Floyd resisted for a moment before his body relaxed gradually.

"I have something I should tell you, too," Floyd murmured once Greyson let go of him. "Uh, about Brett."

*Floyd's ex? I keep thinking I won't hear his name again, and then I do.*  
Greyson sucked in a slow breath, then nodded. "What about him?"

"I want to be upfront with you so you don't think I'm playing games. He's going to be at the reunion, and I think he's trying to... I don't know, pressure me into going with him?" Floyd furrowed his brows as he looked at Greyson. "I don't really get it."

Greyson's eyes narrowed. "Is he harassing you?"

"Only on Grindr. I deleted it. Got sick of it, and..." Then, Floyd turned red as he glanced away. "Yeah."

"And what?" Greyson asked, his lips quirking up.

"And I don't think I need it anymore." Floyd gazed at him, the question in his eyes.

His heart thumping, Greyson nodded. "Er, getting back to Brett – are you in danger?"

Floyd's chuckle broke the tension a little. "No, no," Floyd assured him quickly. "I just wanted to warn you he'll be lurking around like a... fly on the wall, most likely."

"Okay." Greyson bristled with protective instincts still – which answered Floyd's unspoken question. But there was something else here, and it took Greyson a moment to see him. By telling him about Brett being around, Floyd trusted him not to go beat the shit out of him again.

Ugh. He had to live up to that better person he was trying to be. He licked his lips. "Okay. You can handle this, then, but... tell me if you need anything. Seeing us together at the reunion will probably scare him off. Is he still even living here?"

"No. He's back in town for the reunion and probably visiting family or something. For, like, the last couple weeks. It's weird. Maybe he's bumming around," Floyd scowled.

Greyson breathed out a quiet sigh. "Yeah." He tapped his toe on the ground now, still leaning into Floyd.

"What?"

"I should probably talk about my stuff, too." *It's been weeks of trying not to. I don't know how to even approach it.*

Floyd nodded slowly, squeezing Greyson around the shoulders gently. "Only if you want to."

"I used to hurt myself because I get... really wound up. It's like all the anxiety or guilt or whatever gets under my skin and it's the only way I could think of to let it out," Greyson said. He spoke quickly, not giving himself the chance to realize what he was admitting and shut down. "I still *want* to sometimes, but I haven't in a long time. Well, I still pinch myself sometimes to snap out of the moment, or... the tattoos... um, they hit that same button."

"Is that a bad thing?" Floyd asked. His expression was neutral but invested in what Greyson was saying.

Greyson slowly shook his head. "It's just training my brain not to go for the first option. *Just*, I say, like it's easy."

Floyd chuckled and pressed his lips to Greyson's shoulder. "I'm proud of you, though. We both went through stuff. I turned it outward, you turned it inward."

When Floyd put it that way, it made sense. Greyson nodded. "Suppose so."

"I'll never push you to talk about anything specific," Floyd said quietly. "But I forgive you for everything that happened with Brett. And I think the world of you. It says a lot that you chose to quit rather than be on the wrong side of justice back there in Alberta."

Greyson's heart squeezed as he shifted to rest his head on Floyd's shoulder. He closed his eyes for a few moments, then murmured, "Thanks." For the first time, the words really sank in: Floyd was *proud* of him.

"And when you do wanna hurt yourself, if you can let me know, I'll try to distract you. Or I'll leave you alone. Whatever you need from me. But I want to see you as much as I can," Floyd chuckled.

"Me too," Greyson laughed. "I love..." he trailed off, then cleared his throat and glanced quickly at Floyd. *Is that gonna freak him out?*

"I love you," Floyd murmured quietly. Then Floyd's warm lips met his in a long, warm kiss, as Greyson's chest flooded with relief.

When they pulled back, Greyson was breathless and smiling back. "I love you too."

"I also love making sure my employees open the shop on time, and I'm sure you love getting to your classes on time..." Floyd trailed off with a mischievous grin.

"Oh, shit." Greyson checked his watch. "Ohhh, that's a horrible



cliffhanger.”

Floyd laughed. “Can we hang out today after work, though? We were talking about it last night and then it became all about... well, last night.”

Greyson smirked. “Yeah.” He pecked Floyd's lips a few more times, then rose to his feet with a reluctant groan. “You'd better get going.”

“Chase will have a field day if I come in wearing yesterday's clothes,” Floyd chuckled.

Greyson laughed as he walked Floyd to the door, kissing him a few more times along the way.

Then Floyd pulled back with a frustrated groan. “I *gotta* go.”

“Mmhmm.” Greyson pecked Floyd's lips.

“You devil.” Floyd swatted Greyson's ass with a grin, then pulled open the door to escape while Greyson laughed.

Only after he was gone did Greyson think about Brett again. Meeting him seemed like a tiny obstacle in comparison to their bond. With Greyson by his side, Floyd could handle this on his own. Greyson wasn't going to let Floyd walk into that reunion alone.

Floyd

“Oof, no. My arm's too sore. If you didn't make me do so many chest presses...” Floyd complained with a playful wink.

Greyson snorted. “Oh, blame me for you actually working those biceps.” He squeezed Floyd's arm, pressing the car door lock button on his remote. “You sure about this?”

Floyd drew a breath and let it out, then nodded sharply. “Positive.” Floyd linked arms with Greyson.

His boldness had grown leaps and bounds in the last couple weeks. So had Greyson's, in subtle ways, as his tattoos healed beautifully. Although Greyson didn't want him to get burned for this, Floyd really wanted to test it out. A reunion was the perfect place to announce who he was – and whom he was with.

They walked toward their old high school building, nudging each other as they pointed out the tiny, familiar details: its yellowish brown bricks, the rows of windows up to their old classrooms, and the hugeness of the parking lot that, in winter, hosted piles of snow from the plows.

“It's weird being here again... especially this time of year,” Greyson laughed as they stepped through the open front doors. The doors were decorated with streamers and balloons to welcome them.

Almost the moment they stepped into the school doors, they spotted a woman sitting behind a registration table. She greeted them cheerily, her smile freezing for a moment when she spotted their linked arms.

“Floyd...?”

Floyd couldn't say he recognized her, but he nodded. Of course everyone would know him. “Floyd Turner. This is Greyson Peters.”

“Ah, yes, I see you both. Welcome!” She could hardly keep her eye off their linked arms. “Here, take your name tags...”

Finally, Floyd spotted her name tag: Libby. “Oh, you were – I think we had math together.”

"We did! Hello again."

"Hi. How's... life going?" Floyd smiled.

"Great! I'm working out in Moncton now, but I came back to town for the reunion. You run a tattoo shop, don't you? I've heard about it."

"Right, I do," Floyd nodded. He unlinked arms with Greyson long enough to stick his tag onto his shirt, leaning over for a peek at the guest list. "How many people are here?"

"Oh, lots. Just about everyone who RSVP'd already!"

Floyd eyed Greyson. If he hadn't driven so slowly...

"Not my fault we got stuck behind the delivery truck," Greyson laughed.

Libby laughed and pointed them through to the gym. It was decorated with more streamers and balloons, but it was still the same old gym.

Floyd smiled as he glanced around, then looked at Greyson. "*This* place."

"It wasn't so bad," Greyson shrugged.

Floyd snorted. *Maybe not for you.* The locker room had been his least favorite spot of the whole school. He just glanced toward it and scoffed.

It took Greyson a moment, but then he nodded slightly. "Ah. Come on, let's get punch." He put his hand on Floyd's back to steer him over to the punch.

"Hey, man. Sweet tats!"

It was Ashton, the little asshole. *Bet he's not a star soccer player.* He wasn't ripped like one, anyway. Floyd smiled back and reached out for a quick handshake. "Thanks. Long time no see. How are you doing?"

"Oh, not bad. I'm working in tech now."

"Oh?" Floyd seemed to remember him making fun of geeks in his day. "Came around to technology?"

"Got offered a job I couldn't resist," Ashton shrugged. He came off a little humbler than before, but still pretty full of himself. "The punch is great. There's an open bar over there, too. Only beer and cider."

Greyson nodded. "Great. Just what we need."

The music was playing quietly for now, tables and chairs around the

gym and a dancing floor cleared off for later that night.

“Let's go get cider,” Floyd suggested and steered Greyson over there with an arm around his shoulders. He leaned in to murmur, “You still cool with this?”

“Very.”

Floyd smiled at the way Greyson put it, then stole a quick kiss before buying cider. The proceeds were going to this year's graduating class charity project, apparently.

And then, just as they had their cider bottles open, there he was: Brett.

Brett looked like he hadn't aged a day. He still had that mop of ugly brown hair, but he was pretty. His eyes had attracted Floyd before.

Floyd still remembered the sight of them black and blue as he spat blood out of his mouth and rebounded on Floyd to get his goddamn work partner out of his life before he took care of him.

Floyd's arm around Greyson's shoulders tightened, but he didn't flinch at Brett – just smiled. “Hello. You haven't changed a bit.”

Brett looked taken aback. “Floyd?” He was staring down at Floyd's tattooed arms, then at Greyson. “Oh, Greyson.”

Greyson nodded once, but he didn't make a move.

Floyd interrupted the intense eye contact going on between the two by clearing his throat. “This is my boyfriend. I'm sure you remember him, Brett.”

Brett looked almost sick. He glowered for a moment before he folded his arms, swigging from his bottle. “Ah, yeah. I've seen him around.”

Somehow, looking at that obnoxious face was so much more bearable than Floyd had feared. He felt utterly safe with Greyson's arm around his waist.

“How have you been?” Greyson asked, his voice even and cheery, too. Floyd almost grinned: he was playing along perfectly.

Brett cleared his throat, then dug his phone out of his pocket. “Oh, you know. Busy with work. I might have to leave for that soon.”

Floyd tried not to laugh at how obviously fake that was. “Right. Good seeing you anyway.” He spotted a few more interesting people – friends from his last couple years of high school. He turned from Brett to head to them, and Greyson stayed with him to head over and greet

them instead.

It took about twenty minutes before he felt the adrenaline completely settle again, but the whole time, he felt so open and... well, strong.

Being able to look Brett in the eye and laugh at him was a freedom Floyd had never dreamed of, and it meant so much that Greyson was right there with him. He hoped it helped Greyson feel better about his role in their breakup, too.

And then, the reunion turned to everything Floyd had expected: former classmates comparing careers, babies, and cars. Some were obviously trying to pick someone up, and others had brought plus-ones. All of them were shocked at first to see how close Floyd stood to Greyson, but they hid their reactions to varying degrees. When Floyd bragged that they'd been together for a couple weeks, they got plenty of congratulations – more than a few of those well wishes said in a certain jealous tone.

A few beers and hours later, the dancing started, and Greyson pulled Floyd to the floor for an hour or so of it. They danced with old buddies sometimes, letting loose and reminiscing, and sometimes just by themselves.

Best of all, Floyd didn't even see Brett once more. He could put up with obnoxious old classmates calling them the wrong names or trying to subtly brag about their own careers.

Just before midnight, though, when he'd waited off the last of his ciders, Greyson took Floyd's hand and pulled him close. He leaned in, his lips breathing warm air across Floyd's ear. It made him shudder with pleasure. "Before one more person comes over to show off their receding hairline and baby photos..."

Floyd burst out laughing and squeezed Greyson's hand. "Let's get out of here," he agreed.

As they walked out through the warm evening, swinging each other's hands the whole way, Floyd could hardly stop smiling.

"You trusted me back there," Greyson said quietly as they reached the car.

Floyd paused, squeezing Greyson's hand once more before letting go. "I did. I do."

Greyson cupped his cheeks. They were in the middle of the parking lot, but he didn't rush through the kiss, leaning in slowly to kiss Floyd.

By the time Greyson was done, Floyd laughed breathlessly, running his hand back through Greyson's hair. "Let's definitely head home."

"Home," Greyson promised with a broad smile.

## Epilogue

Floyd

“Man, you were holding out on me!”

Floyd laughed as he leaned back into the couch, avoiding Kevin's punches to his shoulder. “We didn't officially get together until... a couple weeks ago. And I wanted to surprise you.”

“Well, you did!” Kevin grinned. He was home for a week before he flew out for his next training session. Floyd had brought Greyson to Cam's house to see Kevin while he was visiting the brothers.

“A little birdie told me that you were together,” Jackson clicked his tongue from the background. “But you've been all sneaky.”

“I just wanted to enjoy the first few weeks...”

“...and take off early from work all the time,” Chase smirked. “Like that's not obvious.”

Floyd's cheeks flushed.

Greyson laughed as he shook Kevin's hand. “I've heard a lot about you.”

“Oh no,” Kevin groaned, shoving Floyd. “It's not true.”

Floyd smirked. “Too late. I told him everything except where the tattoo is.”

This prompted a wave of laughter from the rest of the guys as they handed over beers. Floyd took his with a wry little smile. He'd never drunk so much since hanging out with them, but he felt confident they wouldn't let him go too far.

“Hey, you two, now that you're being out about it, come to brunch tomorrow,” Chase added, waving his bottle at them both. “And barbecues again! Jesus, we haven't seen either of you for like a month.”

Greyson relaxed and smiled as he was invited back. “Thanks. We will.”

“Free food? Fuck, yeah,” Floyd smirked. “Uh, we were just... you

know, we didn't want to intrude.”

All three brothers stared at him with raised eyebrows. “On?” Cam asked.

“Brother time?” Floyd offered. It sounded ridiculous even saying it.

“Oh, you idiot,” Kevin laughed, punching his arm again as he headed to the couch and scooted over to make room for them both. “Remember when I said you'd be welcome anytime? Just like me, or Ryan, or the other guys.”

Floyd's cheeks flushed as he settled a bowl of chips in his lap. “That, and... you know, we've been busy.”

“Ooooh.” There was a mix of groans and laughter, and Floyd laughed, rolling his head back. *Shoot me now. They'll never let us live it down.*

Jackson leaned over and caught Floyd's eyes. “Problem with being part of this family is you're now fair game.”

“What?”

Jackson grabbed the chip bowl. Floyd had to grab it right back to get another handful before he let it go. Floyd laughed anyway. It was a crazy family he'd been welcomed into, but hearing the word made him glow.

As he caught Greyson's eyes, he could tell his boyfriend was thinking the same thing as he looked with curious fondness around at his new friends. Greyson's family was better than Floyd's, but only time would tell if they would learn to be the family he needed.

Somehow, Floyd had thought the Riley family was welcoming Chase in just because he was Jackson's boyfriend, but... they weren't *that* tight-knit. After all, their mutual buddy Ryan still came out for beers, and they'd welcomed Greyson over for a barbecue within hours of knowing him.

And now he had a second family about as officially as possible. Whether Kevin had told him what Floyd had said about his family, or Chase had hinted to them, they'd welcomed him in. As he watched everyone handing around beers, fighting over the TV remote, and sharing food, Floyd's cheeks hurt from smiling.

Family was made, not born.





THE RILEY BROTHERS BOOK 5

E. DAVIES

## Prologue

“More...!”

Kevin squirmed against the wall, his demand turning into a plea. His forearms were crossed above him, braced against the wall, and he pressed backward into Matty’s body.

The warmth and solidness of the guy in front of him was the best part for Matty—even better than the firm hockey player’s ass grinding against him. Just holding him from behind, his arms looped around Kevin’s waist, was heaven.

Matty pressed an open-mouthed kiss against the back of Kevin’s neck. His hand was up under Kevin’s shirt. Firm chest, even firmer abs... what wasn’t to love? He was tweaking Kevin’s nipples, one and then the other, while he darted his tongue along whatever skin he could reach from this angle.

Even better, Kevin was whimpering softly, his need obvious. He had to be bursting in those tight jeans, pressing himself up against the side of the lake house with his legs spread. The more he begged Matty, the more Matty wanted to hold off and make him wait. That was probably cruel, though, wasn’t it?

And a guy had needs.

He unbuttoned Kevin’s jeans to his throaty groan of approval, then slid his hand into them to rub the shaft a few slow times. Kevin was just about throbbing with need, his whole body vibrating in a way that made Matty’s toes curl into his shoes.

As he hauled down Kevin’s pants, he shoved his own down to his waist.

Why were they even wearing jeans at the lake house?

No, he couldn’t interrupt himself now. He was too busy focusing on what it would be like to grind against that hot ass, slide his shaft between those thighs, teasing at Kevin’s opening...

Matty jerked, and he was in bed, the quiet moonlight streaming in from the top of the bank of windows along one wall. The main sounds in the room were his own breathing, harshly echoing in his ears. He put a lid on it instantly to soften and steady it.

After all, Kevin was in the other bed.

Matty bailed for the bathroom, sliding out from his sheets and striding for the bathroom in the softest, quickest steps he could manage.

Fuck, that dream had been over before the best part began. But sexy dreams about Kevin, of all people?

This was one hell of a crush, and it was the last thing he needed.

As he leaned against the bathroom door and hauled his lounge pants down, Matty fisted his hand around his cock and imagined Kevin's mouth instead.

Yeah, he felt a little guilty, but so what? Nobody else had to know what went on between them in the privacy of his head.

## Kevin

“Push yourself, Kevin. You can't get back fast enough, you'll get better at that.”

Kevin was sweating as he pushed himself back from the board to skate backwards across the ice again, avoiding CJ. He kept his eyes sweeping back and forth as if to check for pucks.

Cam had been right, goddamn it. Kevin had to move faster backwards if he wanted to have any offensive depth. He was still too defensive to make the really ballsy passes that he'd have to make if he made the first line someday.

But that was why he'd hired Glenn, one of the top private trainers in the city. The gap in knowledge and skill level between his university level and the minor leagues was huge. Now, he was just one step below one of the oldest teams in Canadian hockey league history.

It wasn't a team most guys wanted to play for, but it was one of the closest teams to his hometown back in New Brunswick, at least. He'd be able to get home more often than if he got signed in California or something ridiculous.

“Good!” Glenn called as Kevin reached the starting point again. “Hey, CJ, what do you call that? Go do it again.”

Kevin took a moment to push his hair back, the sweat cooling on his skin under his jersey and practice padding. The cold arena air was what he lived and breathed; he much preferred it to sticky Toronto summers. Being acclimatized to it cost him a fortune, because he had to keep the A/C turned way down. Otherwise, he spent all his time at home lying on his bed or the couch complaining about the heat to his roommate.

Hans ignored most of his complaints. He had a lot of stories about how hot it got in his German hometown. Kevin suspected most of them were bullshit from his rudimentary Google searches, but he never called the guy out on it.

“Damn,” Kevin whistled at the speed of CJ's rebound. The guy was insanely quick.

“Okay, boys. Your ice time will run out in a couple minutes, so get your asses moving. One more drill to do.”

“Yes, sir,” Kevin saluted with two fingers. He was splitting the ice rental with three other guys Glenn trained. They all wanted a little ice time, and Glenn agreed so he could judge how much they'd improved this month.

Kevin was probably in the best position of all of them. He hadn't played a full season on his university team, and he hadn't been dragged through the playoffs. And compared to the wear and tear of the major leagues, not to mention the stress and pressure, what he'd experienced before was nothing.

He could see the toll it took on everyone: the first couple weeks had been mostly pilates and yoga, stretching and limbering exercises, and a little weight loss for the guys who ate mostly chicken wings after games.

It didn't discourage him, though. As Kevin flicked a puck along his blade and took off down the ice with it, he felt that same familiar thrill run through his body. It didn't matter if he was doing this in front of a packed arena for a game or by himself on a quiet Tuesday afternoon on the lake back home.

He lived for that rush to his fingers and toes and cheeks – the one that said *I'm right here, and I'm going for it.*

CJ tried to get between him and the empty net, and it partly worked: he flicked his wrist to send the puck into the goal, but it bounced off the crossbar.

Kevin saw his chance, though – he darted around CJ, nestled the puck at the bottom of his blade, and slapped it straight into the net.

“Nice,” CJ approved, punching his arm and circling back to wait for Hemmer's approach.

Kevin took a moment to pump his fist as he shifted to skate backwards towards the net and look for Glenn's reaction. Then he pushed himself away from it again, heading up the side board.

“Watch your weight distribution,” Glenn told him, his arms folded tightly. His eyes were already on Hemmer, who was duking it out with CJ in the neutral zone. “Can't let someone knock you off-balance when you're about to score. I could have hit you with a feather there.”

Frustration welled in Kevin's chest, but he nodded sharply. He hadn't felt solid on his feet, so Glenn was no doubt right. But it felt

sometimes like he never won anything fully anymore. Even if he nailed a great move in the few practices and partial games he'd played this month, Glenn always had something else to point out.

But that was life these days. As he and Hemmer rotated in to act as defense while CJ and Fisher practiced, Kevin didn't dwell on it. If he wanted to earn his keep around here, he had to take every bit of critique on board and use it to improve himself. He couldn't let the coach criticize the same thing twice.

In the locker room once their time was up, Kevin's mind was still on that moment. Could he have stepped the other way around CJ? He couldn't very well grab CJ's stick, but he might have knocked it aside – but then he would have missed the rebound...

“Hey, Kev. You're a million miles away.”

Kevin blinked and refocused on the hand obnoxiously snapping in front of his eyes as CJ slapped his arm with the other hand. He elbowed CJ in the gut and laughed, yanking his jersey off. “Sorry, I was replaying. What?”

“We're going out to a bar tonight. Cruising for the *ladies*,” CJ drawled. He elbowed Kevin back, then sat on the bench to yank off his shin guards. “You in?”

Kevin hedged and threw a careless shrug out there, tossing his shoulder pads into his bag. “I dunno, man. I'm training early tomorrow.” How would he explain that picking up chicks wasn't his idea of a good time without outing himself?

“Come on, you haven't felt the *pro* effect yet,” Hemmer laughed.

“The what?”

CJ nodded. “When you introduce yourself as a hockey player. It works at any sports bar... or most regular bars. You can't tell me you haven't tried it.” He elbowed Kevin again, but Kevin dodged and shoved him off.

Not with women, that was for sure. Kevin scoffed and zipped up his bag. “Nah, man.”

“Some of us, some Leafs will all be there. A mixed crowd. You gotta get out sometime, man! Even if you're too busy to get laid...”

Kevin laughed. “Okay, fine.”

He rubbed his face, then held out a hand to grip CJ's forearm and clap his back in a quick goodbye. “See you, then. Text me when you're

going out.”

“Awesome,” Fisher told him. “We will.”

Hemmer waved. “See you, man.”

“See ya.” Kevin shouldered his bag and took off out of there, gripping the strap tightly. There were two equally huge risks to going out. One was that he'd get distracted by the wrong things when he had to focus so hard on his career this summer. The other...

Kevin remembered what Cam had told him Coach Walker said to him: “Keep your head down until you're ready to be the poster boy.” The first out gay pro league player was going to have a wild ride.

All Kevin wanted to do was play well and go home happy with the game he'd played. Maybe with a guy, but not in front of the cameras. Maybe with a bunch of the guys, just as friends.

In any case, he had to start by making friends.

*Tonight's the night.*

Matty

"The only guy worse for it is *that* asshole." Fisher's finger jabbed Matty in the chest, jolting him out of his reverie.

Matty shoved his shoulder into Fisher's, nearly knocking the guy off his bar stool. He laughed as Fisher scrambled back onto it. "What lies are you telling now?"

"Nothing!" Fisher retorted, leaning back so Matty could see the guy on his other side. "We're telling Kevin to get out more."

Matty had seen Kevin once or twice in the gym. They'd never really talked yet. Had he noticed him, though?

Oh, hell, yeah.

The guy had gorgeous long lashes and bright eyes, an as-yet-unbroken nose, and smile lines on either side of his full lips. He was broad, but not built like a tank. He looked lean and honed even under his t-shirt.

That was another thing: he was wearing a t-shirt and dark jeans, a little more casual than the guys who were obviously dressing up to get girls tonight. They all had cologne and collared shirts on, and they were casting their eyes around the bar now and then.

Kevin, though, was just leaning against the counter, a beer bottle in one hand. He raised it and nodded slightly. "Hey."

"Hi," Matty answered, hoping Kevin hadn't noticed the once-over that he'd just given him. It was pretty normal for hockey players to size each other up, anyway. It was probably all the testosterone. He sipped his beer, then stood up and stepped around Fisher to shake hands. "How's it goin'? You're one of the new guys, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I am," Kevin laughed. "Been in town about a month."

"Training with Glenn, too, huh? Smart move," Matty told him. "I've been working with him for three years now and I get back way more than I put in."

Kevin brightened up. "Yeah? Sweet, man. Thanks."

"I've seen you working out, too. He's pushing you pretty hard. You



finish a season already?”

“Yeah, I transferred from Fredericton.”

Fredericton... it only took Matty a second to figure out who else he knew from there. “Oh, shit, really? Like Cam?”

Cameron had been one of his teammates before he'd been forced out of hockey from a medical condition right before being called up. In his stead, Matty had gotten the spot. Cam had been really fucking good about it, though — not jealous or snarky at all. Cam was great and low-drama. Matty missed the guy.

“Yeah, Cam Riley?” Kevin answered, grinning. “I know him. He's a good buddy of mine.”

“No shit. He told me one of his friends was coming out.” Matty punched Kevin's arm lightly, and... Kevin's tongue darted across his lips. Just for the briefest of seconds, before Kevin raised his bottle for another quick sip and laughed.

That was a distinct tingle of interest down Matty's spine.

Shit, however pretty the new guy was, he couldn't get turned on by him. For so many reasons.

He tried to ignore that suspicion: *if Cam's gay, is Kevin?* But no, they all had plenty of straight buddies — or buddies who said they were straight, anyway. No out gay players at the top level meant most guys were pretty quiet about it all the way down.

“Yeah?” Kevin grinned as he pushed his empty bottle across the counter and made eye contact with a bartender to ask for another. “That's awesome. Dude. Small world.”

“It is, man.” When Matty glanced back at Fisher, he was chatting to a blonde woman on the other side of the bar. “Oh, of course he's gone already.”

Kevin laughed. “Yeah, they invited me out to pick up girls and make friends here. Apparently I'm supposed to get out of the gym more. I'm always in there.”

“I know,” Matty grinned. “I'm always the last one in there.”

“Yeah, me too. Like I said.” Kevin's chest swelled as he stood a little straighter, like he was challenging Matty.

Matty let it drop. He didn't need a contest of Biggest Gym Addict right now. He just gave an easygoing smile to help Kevin relax. “So you

knew Cam in school?”

“Yeah, most of the kids in that town know each other,” Kevin told him. “He was a bit older than me, but the hockey kids all know each other, believe me.”

Matty knew that feeling. “I’m from a small town too.” He clinked bottles with Kevin when he got his new beer and paid. “I’m sorry. I know that clique feeling.”

Kevin laughed. “Yeah. Anyway, Cam got signed here pronto. I finished up my degree in Fredericton first.” He said it almost apologetically.

“That’s cool,” Matty told him instantly. As far as Matty was concerned, he didn’t have anything to apologize for. It wasn’t like he was doing a PhD and still waiting to be picked, like the last kid up against the wall in dodgeball. Matty hadn’t seen the guy play yet, mind, but Coach Walker wouldn’t have wanted him if he didn’t have talent or grit, probably both.

Kevin relaxed when Matty didn’t judge him or anything, then nodded. “What about you?”

“Been here on your team a couple seasons now, and I got called up for this season.”

“Oh yeah? You play forward, right?”

“Yeah. You too?”

Kevin nodded.

That explained the weird bit of defensiveness. They could be competing for the same spot on the team someday, even though it didn’t really work that way. “Right, left...?” Matty asked.

“Left,” Kevin told him.

*Phew. Future linemates, maybe.* “Centre,” Matty countered with a nod. “For now, anyway. We’ll see what happens after camp.”

Prospects camp: their chance to prove themselves. They could get sent home, or they could get a spot on the first line. The latter was a lot less likely, but the whiz kids could earn their place at the head of the team by showing off their talents.

Matty wished he had that kind of natural spark. His hockey had always been about grinding through, not showing up with a few flashy moves and a combative attitude and expecting that to open doors. He didn’t kid himself: there was a lot more competition out there than

there were spots on this team, and a guy who was easy to get along with was more valuable than a princess talent.

“Ugh,” Kevin shivered. “I don’t know what to expect.”

“It’s intense, but it’s good,” Matty reassured him. “It’s awesome. The coach is there, he doesn’t take bullshit. Everyone works his ass off and the best guys stay. Good old-fashioned grit.”

Whenever Kevin smiled, his face lit up; when he talked hockey, there was passion in his eyes and he leaned forward a little. His t-shirt clung to his body, moving with him rather than giving Matty a peek down at his chest.

*Shit, no. Don’t be a creep,* Matty told himself. He had this odd feeling that Kevin wouldn’t mind it, but he couldn’t be sure... and he couldn’t be wrong.

Kevin’s energy alone was magnetic. He refused to lean in towards Kevin no matter how much as he wanted to.

“Yeah. That’s why I’m training so hard this summer,” Kevin admitted. “Cam told me the first season’s the big one. You gotta show your potential, even if you’re not there yet.” His eyes were filled with that nervous energy.

“Yeah,” Matty told him. “Just take it easy. It seems scary the first time, but everyone wants you to do well.” Matty remembered those feelings: the nervous excitement about being given a shot to go further than he ever had, the terror that somehow he was an impostor and he’d be kicked off the team for being a shitty player, and worst of all, the sucker punch that was reading message board speculation about his potential. “And you’ve got the trainer of a lifetime on your side right now.”

“Right,” Kevin agreed. “Man, we should hang out sometime. Any friend of Cam’s...”

Matty knew exactly why that idea sent a thrill of excitement down his body, straight to his cock.

But no, this wasn’t a hookup in a dark bar near Church and Wellesley. Kevin was a new guy in town and probably a little lonely, especially moving here from his hometown. This was gonna be his first time playing away from home. He needed buddies.

*Just buddies,* Matty told himself firmly. *You can do buddies.* He prayed Kevin wasn’t angling for a wingman at the bars.

“Yeah!” Matty answered and clinked bottles again. “A friend of Cam’s is a friend of mine, too. Go for drinks sometime?”

“That’d be great,” Kevin agreed, and the grin on his face made Matty smile.

If nothing else, having a young, green player around who was just starting to see the world open up for him would be a change. With his own transition to the major leagues this fall, Matty felt exactly the same, only one step up.

Maybe they had even more in common than Cam.

Kevin

“Are you going hiking again this week? Maybe I should come.” Kevin closed the cupboard doors, handing curry powder over to his roommate, Hans.

Hans was tall, a dual German-Canadian citizen, and kept to himself pretty well. He didn’t have the money to pay for a trainer like Glenn. He’d told Kevin his plan was to work out on his own. He was biking, hiking, and swimming this summer. Frankly, that sounded more fun than gym work, even if it was less targeted and scientific.

“Oh, perhaps,” Hans answered. He spoke English perfectly, but rapid-fire like he couldn’t remember where one word or even sentence ended and the next began. “I don’t know. I have to talk to a few of my buddies about it. I’ll let you know. Curry’s done, set the table.”

“Yeah, cool,” Kevin nodded and pushed away from the counter to grab forks and set the table. So far, they’d only been living together for a month but they got along pretty well. They had similar taste in food and neither of them were weekly partiers.

Hans had been on Kevin’s team for two years now. “Hey, so, most of the guys I’m running into have been with the team — or the big boys’ team — for a couple years now. Not a lot of newbies.”

As Hans carried bowls of curry and rice to the table, he nodded. “Everyone’s a second- or third-year, since the big reorganization.”

“Right,” Kevin nodded.

Hans was on the active reserve list right now, but that could change at prospect camp. For now, he’d taken Hans’s spot on the team since they played the exact same position.

Kevin was glad Hans didn’t seem too fussed, though. As a newbie, he’d likely be swapped in and out throughout the first season anyway. With more experience than him, Hans had a good shot of doing better.

“I’m happy where I am,” Hans shrugged. “It might be a little less active this year, but I was a wreck after last season. If I don’t have to stress about getting to top shape by September, my summer will be a

lot happier.”

Kevin couldn't understand that. If *he* was rotated out of the team this season, he planned to work his ass off to get back on it as soon as possible and earn his minutes on the ice so he could prove himself there.

The insatiable urge to keep getting better was almost a problem for Kevin. His goals were to build up his strength and stamina and ruthlessly massage out flaws in his technique and strategy.

“You could come swimming with me, though,” Hans suggested. “I’m going after lunch.”

Kevin groaned. “After curry?”

“It’s not that bad! Don’t overeat.”

Although he complained and grumbled to make Hans laugh, Kevin left a little room as he dumped out his bowl and washed up the dishes.

While Kevin trained at Glenn’s gym daily, he also had a membership at the neighborhood gym. A lot of players living in this area did. It was solid, quiet, clean, had great equipment, and there was camaraderie with fellow players as well as civilians since it wasn’t a pro-exclusive gym.

Best of all, they had a sauna, hot tub, and a swimming pool. Sometimes, after he woke up aching from a workout, Kevin went to the gym early just to sit in the hot tub until the janitor gave him concerned looks.

Today, though, he’d push himself into timing a few laps. He didn’t rigorously time it, but the overall strength and muscles built by swimming beat many other types of cross-training. Best of all, there wasn’t the same joint strain that came with pounding the pavement or a treadmill.

And it was fun to horse around in the pool sometimes. When Hans hesitated to climb into the pool, dunking his foot in first as he always did, Kevin grabbed it and hauled him down into the water.

Hans choked and coughed when he surfaced, then splashed him while Kevin laughed and dodged, splashing back with an open hand. He might not have brothers of his own, but he knew how to win a water fight.

“You ass!” Hans exclaimed, grabbing Kevin’s arm to try to push him down into the water.

Kevin just laughed harder, inhaling the chlorine-scented air with the delight of a preteen boy. God, he hadn't had this much fun in a pool for years. On school trips to the local pool, where horsing around got disapproval from the teacher in the form of a—

“Hmph.”

The distinctly disapproving noise was followed by the gentle splash of someone slipping into the pool.

Kevin cast a careless glance over his shoulder at whatever old bird had it in for fun.

*Oh, shit.*

It was Matty, and he was ducking under the divider to the closest lane. As he surfaced, despite Kevin's best efforts to glance away again, his eyes seemed to be glued to the older pro.

Water rivulets ran down Matty's back, between his angular shoulder blades and the straight, long line of his spine, dripping from the tips of his slicked-back hair. It was a scene straight from some cheesy movie — or soft-core porn, he tried desperately not to think — but that didn't detract from his interest.

“Hey, man,” Kevin called out, trying to ignore the sudden dryness in his throat. He heard Hans chime in, but didn't really register his roommate's voice. He was more focused on getting a response — any response.

Fuck. He admired Matty — had watched him in all the games Cam had shown him, and more on his own. This was strictly professional. The pool tile was slick under his hand as he gripped the side of the pool, treading water.

Matty pulled himself back against the wall like a sprinter at the starting line and waved. Water droplets caught on his stubble and chest hair, and the edge of the water played over Matty's perky nipples.

And then Kevin was underwater, his asshole roommate shoving him under while he was distracted. Kevin kicked Hans's leg to make him let go of him as he surfaced, then splashed him once more full-on in the face for good measure. “C'mon, we gotta work out, not just play all day.”

The sudden burst of focus was *not* brought on by glancing back again to see and hear those clean strokes cutting through the water.

This was another chance to impress people who mattered. Not that Matty was captain or had any say in the hiring decisions, but he didn't want to come off as unprofessional before he even started the team.

Despite Hans grumbling, Kevin pushed away from the wall and ducked under the divider once Matty was on the other side of the pool, then into the next lane. Hans had to take the other lane.

For a moment, Kevin's gaze was caught by those muscled arms rising from the water in swift, quick movements as Matty powered himself back towards their side. But fuck, *no*, Hans was right next to him. No way was he getting a hard-on in the pool. Not from and in front of some guy he wanted to impress.

He had to distract himself.

Kevin pushed himself against the wall, barely waiting to get into a good form before pushing himself off and through the water. Swimming with a semi wasn't the most comfortable, but it was a fuckload better than letting it get any further.

He quickly distracted himself from the sheer rhythm of keeping track of his strokes. Not the kind he wanted right now, but...

*Fuck off*, he told his intrusive thoughts.

Stroke, stroke, breathe.

Stroke, stroke—

"Fuck," he yelped when his hand cracked the side of the pool.

*Look ahead, too, idiot*, he told himself. Before he even finished the thought, he cast an unconscious glance to the side to see if Matty had witnessed it.

Matty was clinging onto the wall there, his expression tightening for a moment. "All right?"

"Yeah," Kevin breathed out a quick laugh and shook it out.

Matty gave him a quick jerk of his chin, then pushed away again, streaking through the water.

Kevin waited a second or two to make it clear that he was *not* racing him, then pushed away a little less smoothly for a lap.

This time, he squinted ahead of him, through the water despite his blurry eyes, to keep an eye on the rapidly approaching pool wall. He hesitated with his last stroke or two, then grabbed the wall.



Now he had a sense for the length of the pool again, he could try a few other strokes. But front crawl was the best for practicing breath control.

"I hate the chlorine taste," Hans complained as he pushed off for his first slow lap. He clearly wasn't aiming for speed.

Matty smirked, his gaze flickering to Kevin after Hans was off. "That's probably not chlorine."

Kevin coughed on the chemical-laden air, then snorted with laughter and pushed himself into another couple laps.

The silence was more companionable now that Kevin knew Matty wasn't pissed at him and Hans for horsing around in the pool. They were probably a dozen laps in before Matty spoke up again. "You're not bad."

In fact, Kevin could probably keep up with Matty. He tried to remind himself that Matty had had a longer season than him, and that he was sleeker and had less drag to deal with, but his chest still swelled pridefully. "You, too."

They were both pulled up against the pool wall, and Kevin saw the flash of competitiveness in Matty's eyes before he even said a word.

Kevin played dirty: he pushed away from the wall that second and cast Matty the quickest flash of a grin before surging forward. Matty was already in motion beside him, the force of the current from his strokes pushing lightly at Kevin as Kevin tried to break the water in front of them before Matty could.

If he'd thought Matty was swimming hard before, it was clear he'd been holding himself back.

Two could play that game. Kevin's back and shoulders stretched as he reached further, pulled himself harder, and kicked his legs harder than ever.

Then, in a shockingly small number of strokes, they were done.

No, they weren't. Matty was flipping underwater, just like on TV.

Kevin snorted, grabbing the wall and pulling it towards himself. He was on his back, but he didn't have time to correct that. He'd win unfairly if he had to.

On his back, he felt even stronger. He watched the ceiling tiles above him to keep straight in his lane as he closed the gap between him and Matty. Or so he hoped. He couldn't really look over and see this way,

but he felt rippling water lapping against his side, so he was close.

Then the back of his hand was smacking the wall, and as he looked over, Matty's hand was closing around the wall.

Too fucking close to call.

The burn in Kevin's muscles and lungs reminded him of sweaty nights under the sheets with someone. His ex-partner, maybe, or a random guy. He hadn't dated since moving here. He needed to change that soon.

Matty grinned at him, his dark eyes sparkling. "Again?"

"Again," Kevin told him, even though he was heaving for breath, he pushed himself into motion. Kevin watched as Matty flipped over to his back, waiting until he pushed away before he straightened out his legs to push himself away again.

This time, Kevin hit the wall a good half-second before Matty, but he didn't waste a second turning to race back to the start.

And he won that one by a second.

"Nice." Matty gave him an easygoing smile, but Kevin could see it in his eyes: he hated to lose. He knew that feeling all too well.

That led to another two laps, then another.

Now, Matty was winning. He had better stamina, and it was starting to piss Kevin off. He wasn't a dick, though. He nodded his acknowledgement every time Matty beat him.

"Jesus, you two burn out all your energy now," Hans snorted. "Go ahead."

Kevin jolted. Shit, he'd almost forgotten he was there.

"No, I'm done." Matty pushed himself out of the pool easily, his biceps and triceps bulging as he hopped up onto the edge of the pool. His swim trunks clung for a moment to his bulge, right at eye level...

Kevin hauled his eyes over to Hans instead, his nails digging into the tiles. "I think I wore myself out, too." He waited until Matty strode into the locker room entrance before raising an eyebrow at Hans to ask what that sudden exit was about.

"He gets in a zone," Hans told him, his voice low to avoid having it carry over the water of the pool. "Don't mind it."

Kevin glanced at the entrance to the locker rooms. He had an idea of

the knot that might be tying up Matty's chest, because there was one in his own chest despite the fun competition.

Did Matty fear losing, even something this insignificant? Nah, maybe that was Kevin projecting his own issues onto Matty.

Matty

Jesus. Why hadn't he been able to keep his razor-sharp focus with Kevin around? He was used to swimming with hot guys — hot teammates, even — around. Hell, even buff dudes, stripping in the locker room right in front of him didn't do much for him anymore.

It wasn't just proximity.

Yeah, Kevin *was* exactly his type — sleek but muscled, with a six-pack he would love to run his tongue over and full lips that would look perfect dragging down the length of his cock.

But it wasn't just looks, either. It was that fire in Kevin's eye when he'd flicked his eyes towards the other wall, responding to Matty's unspoken challenge without a second thought.

And Kevin had won the first couple laps, stinging Matty's pride.

Well, he'd cheated the first one, but Matty had been slow, distracted by the flash of a mischievous grin splitting that gorgeous face.

But Matty had so fucking much to focus on. Like, shit, not getting bumped back down. He'd only gotten called up at the end of last season. They hadn't called him up *for* the playoffs, meaning he wasn't their first pick. They were counting on him getting into shape before the season began. Then, he'd get a few sheltered minutes here and there, carefully testing his abilities.

He'd really only gotten called up because Cam — by all accounts a better player, with more points and fewer flaws — had collapsed on ice, and he'd been their number two choice. Maybe even number three or four.

Matty couldn't throw away this chance.

Voices echoed down the hall and Matty quickly yanked the shower knob to turn the shower water off, then grabbed his towel to run once over his hair, face, and torso before wrapping it around his waist.

Not that he didn't think he had self-control around the guy, but just in case. Adrenaline did funny things sometimes.

“Hey,” Kevin greeted, that warm voice sending a shiver of pleasure straight through Matty. A nice, sexy, rough voice did *everything* for and to him, but nobody had to know that.

“Hey,” Matty answered briefly, walking over to the lockers while his toes curled into the damp, lemon-scented floor. He stepped around the yellow *floor wet, caution* sign and pulled open his locker. “Nice work back there.”

“You too.” Kevin sounded sincere. “You’re good. You swam as a kid?”

“Yeah.” Matty laughed under his breath. “About all there is to do in my damn town.”

“I know the feeling,” Kevin laughed, and Matty smiled despite himself. “I bet Cam bitched about Fredericton a few times.”

Matty hesitated, but didn’t comment on the word choice. He just coolly answered, “Yeah.” He pulled his change of clothes out of the locker.

Kevin slammed his locker shut and headed for the shower, and Matty didn’t glance after him. Hans followed a minute later.

Matty let out a breath, stepping out of his towel and into trunks, then jeans. He buttoned them up and toweled his torso off so he could force his t-shirt onto his damp torso.

He still smelled like the pool, but that was fine. He wasn’t trying to impress anyone.

By the time he was sitting down to slip his sandals on again, Kevin was on the other side of the locker room stepping into his clothes.

“So, how long have you been living here, then?” Matty asked, to make a bit of conversation.

“A month,” Kevin told him. When Matty glanced back, he was at least wearing jeans. Thank God.

“Liking it?”

“Like I said: there’s a lot I miss about Fredericton, but none of those things are Fredericton.”

Matty laughed at that way of putting it. Sounded a lot like Timmins, his hometown. “Going home soon?”

“For a bit. I think I’ll take a week.”

“Only?” Most of the guys spent at least a couple weeks, maybe a

month or more, at home recuperating and catching up. Then again, Kevin had only just moved out.

“Yeah. You?”

Matty hummed and shrugged. “I can’t say anything. I’m thinking about just a week, too.”

“You live round here?”

“Yep,” Matty told him. “Liberty Village.”

Kevin whistled. “Right around the corner from me! Well, and a few blocks. But I can’t get over how many of us are around here.”

“It’s a nice neighborhood,” Matty nodded. “If you wanna see more of it sometime...” he trailed off. Shit, was he offering to give guided tours to the guy? Who the fuck had let his dick in charge of things?

He was *not* watching Kevin shirtless.

Matty shouldered his gym bag — the lighter one he used for just the things he didn’t keep locked up here.

But Kevin was already beaming, that brilliant smile cracking his face in two again. His teeth gleamed with the smile. “Thanks, man. Yeah, we should hang out.”

“Tell each other stories about Cam,” Matty offered with a laugh. He tried to ignore the awkward shift from Hans. Hans had never really been close to Cam, which made the conversation a bit awkward. They didn’t have anything against each other, but groups were bound to form in any group of a couple dozen or more players. First line and fourth line forwards — active reserve forwards now — didn’t automatically hang out.

Neither did pro and minor league players, but he was resolutely ignoring that. Kevin needed a buddy to help introduce him to his new teammates, and Matty could do that. He liked hanging around guys with his own level of determination, and it was already obvious from his pre-season and college-level play that Kevin had that in spades.

Hans, though...

Speaking of awkward.

“Anyway, I gotta go.” Fisher and Chris would already be waiting for him at the shawarma place by the time he dropped his shit off at home. “Catch you later, man. See you, Hans.”

Hans just grunted and raised a hand despite his extra effort, but Kevin gave him another quick, brilliant smile when he poked his head through his t-shirt and it fell into place over those beautiful abs.

*Out of here, now.* Matty grabbed for the locker room door and pulled it open before he could invent some other stupid excuse to talk to the guy.

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“What kept you so long?”

“Got carried away swimming, missed the tram by a minute... you know how it goes,” Matty sighed as he flopped down onto the comfortable stool with his shawarma in its waxy wrapping. This wasn’t a fancy place, so he didn’t feel bad keeping his buddies waiting to order from some leather-bound menu.

He picked up the laminated sheet and turned it over, even though he already knew what he wanted to order.

Now he was going to give the damn guy tours? Hang out and drink with him? He still couldn’t believe he’d offered that. But what made him different from any other new guy he’d welcome to the team? Well, he wasn’t on his team anymore.

Literally, that was. Who knew about the metaphorical team?

“So that new guy, Kevin,” Fisher said, jolting Matty straight back to the moment. For a brief, irrational moment, he feared he’d said all that out loud.

“Yeah?”

“The one you met the other night—”

“I know,” Matty rolled his eyes. “We talked about Fredericton and shit. He knows Cam.”

“Right!” Chris grinned. “And Cam wound up being gay, right?”

Matty folded his arms and leaned back. “You’re not gonna do the *all gay men know each other* thing, are you?”

“No!” Fisher laughed. “But, you know, he never goes out to bars, right? And he never picks up.”

Matty tried not to feel so defensive. It wasn’t like he really knew the guy yet. “So? Neither do I.”

Chris leaned in with a deadpan expression, his eyes sparkling. “You have something you wanna tell us, man?”

Matty wasn’t sure he liked that his instinctive reaction was to laugh it off. Fuck, these guys were his closest buddies out here, probably even including his friends back home. If he were gonna tell anybody, it would have to be them.

But things were different. He was in the top league now. You didn’t just come out before your first season there even started.

And Fisher and Chris weren’t smiling now, both watching him as if expecting to hear a serious answer.

Holy shit, was he that obvious?

Matty held it a second longer, then laughed loudly. “Gotcha.”

“You fucker,” Chris exclaimed while Fisher broke the tension with a laugh, then punched his arm. “I thought you were serious there.”

“Course not.” Matty waved the menu at Fisher and Chris until it made a *wub-wub* plastic rattling sound, then tossed it to the table. “You ready to order?”

The three hockey players piled after one another, still shoving each other and laughing about how *of course* he didn’t have anything to tell them.

It was only when they were back at the table, Matty cradling his wrapped-up shawarma, that Chris returned to the subject. “But if he is, I wouldn’t blame him for not coming out yet. We’d be cool with it, but... you never know. That’s a big weak spot to show.”

*Don’t flinch*, Matty told himself. It was a weak spot as far as the game went. Matty knew they meant his wellbeing on ice, not that it was wrong in general. “Huh? He’s probably just focused on work like me. Don’t read too much into it. God.”

Fisher looked sympathetic. “Man, you’re still freaking out? You don’t need that shit.”

“Preseason hasn’t even started. Pre-*pre*-training season hasn’t started!” Chris snorted and kicked his chair. “Dude, relax. You’ve got talent, that’s why they called you up. Don’t worry so much.”

The compliments felt hollow to Matty, and he smiled and waved them off. It was true—he had a two-week break before training season and camps properly started. He was gonna ask Glenn what he could do over the break to keep in shape. Maybe only visit home for half the



time, then come back here to work out...

He tried to focus on their discussions of baseball, but his heart wasn't in it. At least the shawarma was fantastic as always, and he didn't have to worry about his meal plan yet, either.

That would come soon enough.

Kevin

The rope burned against his palms, but Kevin convulsively clenched his fists tighter and gritted his teeth through the pain.

His muscles were exhausted, oxygen-starved, and he needed to breathe deeper and haul himself up harder.

The gym wall had never seemed so high.

“C’mon,” he hissed to himself. *I know I can do better than this.*

He was two arms-lengths from the top of the rope.

One...

*Do it. Come on.* His own body weight felt insurmountable, and his knees ached from scrambling and bumping against the gym wall as if it would give him more traction. But this was it: the end of his hardest drill today.

Two!

Kevin grabbed the top of the rope and gasped for breath, but he didn’t want to hold himself up for long. He was supposed to come down as slowly as he could stand, though.

“Hey, Glenn. How’s it going?”

Kevin nearly froze on the rope. From somewhere below, that was Matty’s unmistakable friendly bellow.

“Hey, not bad for an old fellow. What’s got into you? You look like you’re ready to run a mile.”

“Post-season fatigue’s wearing off, I guess,” Matty answered. Kevin twisted to get a better look as he paused halfway down the wall, but he could just make out a hint of a friendly grin from this angle.

“Just in time for your break.”

“Actually, that’s what I wanted a word about,” Matty told Glenn. “I’m not going home the whole time, just the first week. Then I’m coming back here for another week of prep before the first camp.”

“Uh huh,” Glenn answered. “You’re sure you’re up for that?”

“Positive,” Matty answered as Kevin touched the floor. He didn’t look over his way yet, he was so focused on their trainer instead. He looked like he was seeking permission like a man in a desert might cajole the keeper of the spring.

Kevin knew that even thinking up that metaphor meant he needed to drink more water. He grabbed his water bottle to chug down another half a liter, trying to subtly lurk nearby to listen in.

“Okay,” Glenn finally nodded. “I can’t stop you, and you *are* in good shape relative to the rest of the guys.”

“Yes,” Matty pumped his fist.

“I’ll give you a list of suggested exercises for that week.”

Matty had caught sight of him, and he raised his hand in a wave.

Kevin licked his lips and waved back, then approached the other two. “Hey. I heard you’re staying here for a week? So am I.”

“No kidding,” Matty smiled. “Cool. Yeah, I was just asking Glenn about stuff I can do on my own.”

“You two should hook up.”

Kevin didn’t expect that to make his cheeks heat up. Thank God he was already red and sweating from hauling himself up that damn rope. *Get your mind out of the gutter!*

“You’re both moving up a level this year, so you both have some pretty strong incentive to work out, huh?” Glenn asked, glancing between them. “And you’ve got similar work ethics.”

Matty was already nodding, so Kevin did, too.

“I’d like that,” Matty agreed. “We’ll try to sync up schedules. You signed up there or were you just on a pool pass the other day?”

“Patson’s? Yeah, I’m signed up there.”

“Good,” Matty told him. “All the local boys are.”

Glenn nodded. “That’s set, then. Go on, both of you, get out to the yard and stretch it out.” He kicked a medicine ball nearby. “Grab one each.”

They each grabbed a medicine ball and headed out to the yard as instructed. Kevin took deep breaths of the early summer air, unable to

help smiling. God, it was nice not to be buried under snow and bleak grey skies.

“You just finishing your workout?” Matty asked.

Kevin sighed as he flopped over a medicine ball and rolled slowly down it, stretching out his back a bit at a time. “Yeah. Just getting here?”

“Yep.” Matty chuckled. “We’ll try to sync up our workouts.”

“Sounds great.” Kevin grunted when he reached that spot in his lower back. “Man, beginning of summer, you always feel like such a... flabby duck.”

Matty laughed loudly. “The fuck? That’s a weird...”

“Sorry,” Kevin snorted. “I’m the king of weird analogies when I’m tired. My brain just tries to go to the nearest possible words...”

Matty chuckled. “Yeah, I’ve had a couple buddies who talk like that when they’re drunk. Not a lot else to do in northern Ontario.”

Sounded familiar. Kevin grimaced. “Yeah, I bet. That’s where you’re from?”

“Yep. Not a lot there except... mines, and a couple stores... schools, more or less... Jesus, I’m glad to be out of there.”

Kevin winced. “Fredericton isn’t that bad. It’s only a day’s drive away from New York or Montreal, if you really need a break.”

Matty nodded, pulling himself off the ball. He flopped back-first onto it and carefully stretched out his back again. “I’m always glad to be home for the first week and I hate being there the second week.”

“So you’re dealing with that problem before it even starts.” Kevin did a few crunches while he was at it, his hands laced behind his head. His core was still recovering from yesterday’s workout, so he’d gone a little too easy on himself today.

“Bingo,” Matty laughed. “What about you?”

“I’ve never played higher than university level,” Kevin admitted. “Big learning curve.”

“Getting ahead of the jump. Smart, too.”

“We can keep stroking each other’s egos all day,” Kevin smirked, then cast a quick sideways glance at Matty. A lot of guys messed around with fake-gay comments, but it was sometimes hard to read new

friends until it was too late.

Matty laughed, though, and Kevin relaxed. “You looking forward to getting home, though? You gotta say hi to Cam for me.”

“Oh, I will,” Kevin promised. “A buddy of mine’s been going through a rough patch, actually. Sounds like things are up with his parents.”

Matty winced. “Yeah? He our age or younger?”

“A bit older, actually,” Kevin sighed. “But living in the same town as your parents...”

“Yeah,” Matty drawled. “That’s hard, I imagine.”

Kevin couldn’t talk about his buddies behind their backs, so he left it there. “And I get to see my family before the season begins.”

“Yeah, good idea,” Matty told him. “It’s gonna be a long year, your first one. I’m just gonna go out with my buds, and maybe out hiking with my dog.”

“Aw, you got a dog?” Kevin grinned. It didn’t surprise him at all. Matty seemed like a dog guy. “Cute.”

“Shut up,” Matty laughed, peeling himself off the medicine ball once he’d stretched his arms out. “Catch.”

Kevin hauled himself upright just in time to catch the huge, mercifully lightweight medicine ball before it bounced off his face. “Hey!” He tossed it back and laughed, then caught it again as they tossed it back and forth, helping Matty limber up and him cool off.

It was nice just to hang out and chat with this guy, if he could only stop noticing in inconvenient moments how fucking hot he was.

“Okay, Glenn’s gonna come drag me in by the hair if I procrastinate any more. But I’m switching my slot to later so we can be off the same time tomorrow, so he can show us what to do next week.”

“Great.” Kevin was thrilled at the thought of working out with Matty, even if it was intimidating. “Good luck, man. I gotta get home. Let’s go for drinks after the gym tomorrow, yeah?”

“Yeah!” Matty agreed, and Kevin was taken aback by that enthusiastic grin. He had a brilliant white smile—the kind of grin that made him instinctively want to grin back.

Kevin realized he was staring and jerked his head in a quick nod, then grabbed his medicine ball to bring back inside. “Cool. See you

tomorrow, bro.”

*Kinda sad. That’s the closest to a date I’ve gotten in months.*

Matty

“You’re it!”

“Oh, you motherf—get back here!”

Matty stumbled to a halt as he pushed the side gate of the gym open only to find four guys in the middle of what looked like a game of tag.

Then, Klein was slapping his shoulder as he sprinted past Matty. “It! Move or play!”

“Reciprocal tags allowed?” Matty yelled as he dropped his gym bag and took off after him.

Kevin was nearby and laughing, jogging backwards to stay well clear of Matty’s path. “Nope!”

Matty turned on his heel and closed the gap between him and Kevin in a few easy strides, dodging around the field goalposts when Kevin tried to use them as shelter.

God, he could just take Kevin down...

Matty slapped Kevin’s shoulder. “It,” he winked.

Kevin stumbled and glared, but he was breathlessly laughing, too. He was so cute when his cheeks were pink.

No, shit, he had to stop thinking that before he hung out with the guy regularly.

Unless, of course, Kevin’s little fidget when Glenn told them to hook up had meant *that*.

Matty stayed out of the way as Kevin took off to tag Klein right back. He had a big advantage over the rest of them: one of his main skills was sprinting. Every coach had told him he was light and quick on his feet, which helped with his aggressive point-scoring style.

That made games like this almost no fun, because he could evade the others for long enough for them to get bored and choose another target. The only exception was Kevin: he could keep ahead of him, but only barely. Being challenged was both hot and irritating.

When Glenn came to yell that the game was over and tell them to get their asses inside, Matty jogged back to the gate to grab his bag. Kevin was nearby, leaning on the fence for a moment to catch his breath.

“You’re quick,” Matty told him.

Kevin winked, then rubbed his arm down his face and shook his head. “You too. I can’t believe I couldn’t get you there.”

Matty laughed. “It was close, though, man.” He clapped Kevin’s arm as they set off towards the gym side door together. “Just got here?”

“Yep, this was our warmup.” Kevin’s eyes sparkled with a moment of childlike joy. “Been years since I played tag.”

“What a warmup, huh?” Matty grinned. “Now you know why the guys like him. It’s not just grunt work. He finds ways of making it fun.”

Kevin nodded. “I don’t care how fun it is, as long as the end results are worth it, but... I’m weird.”

Matty totally understood what he meant. Some guys got bored—in other words, lazy—when their exercise programs were too same-samey. He didn’t care—he’d eat the same meal ten days in a row, or do the same workout ten days in a row, if it was effective. He high-fived Kevin and jerked his chin in a quick nod. “Agreed.”

“Cool,” Kevin grinned, then held the door for Matty to head through.

Once Matty dropped off his gear, he went to find Glenn, but the smirk on his face made Matty slow his steps. “Oh, no.”

Glenn laughed. “It’s not a *bad* thing. I just noticed you’re in pretty good shape considering where we are in your recovery period.” Kevin was standing next to him and laughing under his breath.

“Which means I get to do what?”

“You’re both doing sleds.”

Oh, boy. Pulling weighted sleds across the field was usually a little later in the season, or even in their intensive week-long training camp. Glenn must have thought they were in fine form.

Matty wasn’t convinced, but if Glenn thought he could handle it, he’d do it.

“Go get ready.”

Matty stripped his t-shirt off and dumped it on a bench by the door, then grabbed his water bottle and headed to the weights area.



Glenn was already there, handing them the ropes of two weighted sleds. "Out you two get."

Kevin's sled looked about heavy as his: a hundred pounds. Not a lot, especially for guys like them, but the idea was a low weight and more reps.

"You know the drill, Matty. You wanna talk Kevin through the unloaded ones, and I'll get these guys set up?"

Matty nodded, leading Kevin to the turf outside. "Right. We do a couple unloaded reps just to get used to having the harness on, then a set of twenty loaded reps, improving our form with everything Glenn tells us. Then a couple more reps without the harness on, and you'll be blazing. We do a lot of this during the camp. He must want you to be familiar with it."

Kevin was studying him and nodding, taking note of every word he said. Those cute pink lips pinched together with focus, making it really hard to focus on anything but them.

It was pretty easy to get the harness on and the sled unloaded, and then Matty went first to demonstrate. Just before he took off, Glenn stepped outside to supervise them both until they started the weighted reps.

Matty focused totally on his body, keeping himself leaning forward and his feet positioned just as he'd been taught. His main focus was on his form, and he kept an ear out for any corrections from Glenn.

Once it was Kevin's turn, the guy took easily to corrections and seemed focused on his own performance. Matty could already see what Glenn meant about his work ethic; Kevin seemed to want to work out as hard as he could. No wonder, given what they were paying for training.

Then they were left alone for the remainder of their reps, watching each other's forms.

Kevin was really giving her, as his American teammates would tease him for saying. Matty could watch Kevin shirtless, the harness straining against his hips, all day long. Sweat trickled down along his chest and over his smooth stomach, and ran down the hollowed ridge of his spine. His hair clung to his forehead, his lips parted for deep breaths, his eyes bright and absolutely focused.

He looked like he'd be dead on ice.

Once they were done, the harnesses off, practicing sprinting together

down the field, it felt like Matty was flying. He barely felt the ground under him without the weight behind him.

And Kevin was there by his side, breath rasping at his lungs, the occasional grunts as his feet hit the ground and propelled himself forward.

For some reason, it was an emotional moment.

Then they slowed as they reached the fence at the other end of the field, and Kevin whooped and grabbed him around the shoulders to haul him in for back-slapping celebration.

“That was fast as *lightning*,” Matty grinned, clapping Kevin right back and bumping their chests together.

Their bare, hot, sweaty chests rubbed together, and fuck, for a second, Matty couldn’t get the image out of his head: Kevin’s body under his as they moved together, fast and hard, in the sheets.

Matty pulled back abruptly with another punch to Kevin’s shoulder, then strode down the field towards the gym again while Kevin jogged to catch up with him. “Fuckin’ great,” he told Kevin.

“Yeah,” Kevin panted. “Awesome. That *did* feel like... flying. Wow. I’ve never felt like that, except on ice. And maybe skis.”

Matty laughed. “You ski?”

“I have. Cross-training. Not much, though. Ski season is skating season, so...”

“Nothing happens during skating season,” Matty nodded. “Man, you’ve got better abs than me.” He reached to playfully try to slap them while Kevin twisted away and laughed. “The fuck did you do that for?”

“I can show you my crunches,” Kevin offered with a grin. “I add an extra twist.”

Matty jerked his head in a nod and elbowed Kevin’s arm, pushing him off-course before taking off in a jog for the building. It was great to find a buddy who didn’t mind joshing around, too. “That’d be sweet.”

Kevin kept his voice down as they approached the building. “It’s so great to do things other than, like, pilates and monkey bars.”

Matty laughed. “I know, it seems boring, but trust him. All the tumbling and handstands and toning shit helps when you come out of a rough season next year.”

“Yeah,” Kevin nodded. “Especially if we go all the way.”

It took an embarrassing second longer than it should have for Matty to finish, *To the playoffs*. “Right,” he quickly nodded. “All right, let’s see what other hell he wants to put us through.” Despite his complaint, he was grinning, and so was Kevin.

There was nothing like the adrenaline that surged through his body when he was working out, except the thrill of an actual game.

Or...

No, he had to keep his mind off Kevin’s cute little ass.

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The first thing Matty noticed when they stripped in the locker room after their workout was, of course, Kevin. His ass wasn’t so little, actually. Hockey players had the best asses. It was a shame Matty hadn’t managed to find a hockey guy to date, really.

Matty pushed the thought aside. Locker rooms had stopped being scary—dangerous, even—after his first few years. Now, he could see dicks and asses all day long and not react at all, even to hot, flirtatious, smart, fit guys slapping him on the ass.

But Kevin? One look at Kevin and he wanted to crowd up into his space and kiss him?

This was something completely new for him.

“So we’re going downtown to get a bite to eat and a drink?” Kevin asked, snapping Matty from his reverie of staring at the shower water tap while scrubbing his body off.

“Yeah, sure,” Matty agreed. “Anything you feel like?”

“I know a pulled pork place, about ten or fifteen minutes away.”

That sounded like heaven, actually. Matty grinned and turned off the water, then headed for the benches. “Sold to the man in... nothing at all.”

Kevin’s sharp, surprised laugh echoed off all four tiled walls of the shower room.

They dressed in relative comfortable silence, politely ignoring the groan or two they heard from each other when they bent this way or that to get dressed.

“Long day here, wasn’t it?” Matty finally asked as they locked away their gym bags.

Kevin nodded hard. “God, yeah. I like it, though.”

“It’s the best job ever.”

“It is.”

They waved their goodbyes to Glenn on the way out, then set off down the sidewalk. The spring air felt even more pleasant drying Matty’s damp hair from the shower.

Matty’s worry about what he’d say when he was alone—as much as possible on the sidewalk of Toronto—with the guy vanished after Kevin brought up last week’s trades. Before they knew it, they were at the pulled pork sandwich place, passionately discussing Carter jumping to the west coast.

“I played with him, though,” Matty repeated himself. “I know the guy.”

Kevin conceded the point and huffed, raising his hands and letting Matty open the door for him. “Fine, but I still think it’s gonna be a mistake.”

“Is it a loyalty thing?” Matty asked, raising a brow. God, this place smelled divine. As he followed Kevin in, he inhaled deeply.

Kevin hesitated, then grimaced. “Yeah, probably. It just leaves a bad taste in my mouth, doing all that work with Coach Walker and then jumping ship the second some team with a better record offers. If guys didn’t do that, you wouldn’t see the skewed stats you do. Instead you have teams who’ve never won, even though there’s plenty of great guys that have played with them.”

Matty chuckled quietly. “It’s always gonna happen, man. Whatcha having?”

“The original. That’s the best. Their gravies are good, though,” Kevin told him.

Matty wound up ordering the same as Kevin, and when they sat down to devour their double-meat sandwiches and kill the workout hunger beast within, he was glad he’d chosen that. It was a damn good sandwich.

“Wanna go to the museum, kill some time before the pub? I feel like a loser if I drink before five,” Kevin grinned.

“Yeah, sure,” Matty laughed. He had a keen sense of humor and strong opinions in addition to that pretty face, clever mind, and good style on the ice. He was in danger of crushing on the guy if he wasn’t careful.

And Kevin was watching him a lot, smiling readily, laughing at even his bad jokes. He was the kind of guy it was nice to kill time with. Matty just hoped they were on the same page here.

Kevin

"I always thought they were magic, man."

Kevin cast Matty a surprised glance. Through the whole geology exhibit, he'd been passionate about all these rocks, and Kevin couldn't quite get it. He could see Matty being a rock nerd as a kid, but there was more there, too.

"Geodes? Crystals hidden inside ordinary rocks, bro. Of course they're magic," Kevin grinned, moving past the enormous grey rock that had been cracked open to reveal the jagged purple spikes of crystal within. "You really like these rocks."

"Yeah," Matty half-smiled, turning to look around at the exhibits along the walls of the museum. "Don't you?"

"I just hate the way they're presented."

Matty looked confused for a moment.

"With all the mining propaganda." Kevin rubbed a hand over his hair, then went to touch the rock wall, tracing the vein through it. "I guess that's a strong word, but..."

Matty was watching him.

"All the mine closures out east, you know," Kevin finished with a shrug. "Left a lot of my buddies in trouble, especially what with Alberta these days."

"But that's not your fault. It's the provincial government. They haven't been supporting any of the mining towns properly," Matty said, and Kevin couldn't tear his eyes away from the passion in his expression. "Mines might not last forever, but mining *can* be a smart short-term strategy to set up something sustainable. I mean, if damn Queen's Park stops holding onto the money they owe us."

Kevin nodded slowly. "Yeah, we don't get a lot of it out our way either, man."

"Fuckin' Alberta."

Kevin laughed. "I think everyone but Albertans agrees on that. God,

it's rough right now, though."

"Yeah, I feel a little sorry for them," Matty admitted, then glanced at Kevin. "But, bro, so many of the guys just blew their money out there! I don't feel bad for *them*."

Kevin snorted and nodded. Everyone knew guys going out for an easy six-figure job and wasting it all on booze. And housing, of course.

"A seventy grand salary like the old days—I guess like what you've got now?" Matty toasted Kevin with an imaginary bottle of beer and Kevin nodded. "That was a huge step up for me. But the first thing I did was start saving."

"Right." Kevin was kind of impressed, actually. So many players their age blew most of their money. Matty seemed way more grounded than your average guy.

He tried not to think about what an attractive trait that was in a lover. It was also interesting in a friend, of course.

"This gold is cool, though," Kevin spoke up to distract Matty from getting back to his political rant.

Matty smiled easily and ran his finger along the vein of gold through the stones. "Yeah, it is. This place is pretty cool, though. Propaganda or no," he winked.

Kevin's cheeks felt hot. He glared at Matty and rolled his eyes. "You're the one who's all *fuck Queen's Park*," he snorted. "But yeah, Toronto does an okay job with its museums."

"And a lot of stuff. I mean, Toronto sucks, but I feel lucky to be here." After his sudden revelation, Matty walked towards the exhibit entrance.

Kevin strode to catch up. "Me, too. Ready for the pub yet?"

"Definitely. No more politics," Matty promised with a laugh and clapped Kevin's shoulder. His hand lingered on his upper back for a few moments too long, and Kevin resisted the urge to bump their shoulders.

Matty cast him a quick glance, scanning his expression before pulling his hand back.

That look... That wasn't a normal straight guy look, not even by Kevin's standards. He didn't comment on it, but it felt like they walked a little closer on their way to the pub.

“So if Toronto isn’t it... what’s your dream team?” Matty asked.

“Are we talking my level or yours?”

Matty laughed. “Either. Say mine, then.”

“Oooh, boy,” Kevin laughed. “Depends on the coach. By the time I get there, they could be totally different. But Vancouver or Florida, just for the weather.”

“Yeah.” Matty snorted. “Fuck Toronto winters, honestly.”

Kevin grinned. “And Fredericton winters.”

“And... pretty much all Canadian winters.”

“We should just become cruise ship workers,” Kevin elbowed Matty. “Entertainers.”

“You play any instruments?”

“Not yet,” Kevin laughed. “But I could learn the guitar. I was kinda halfway through learning as a teen.”

“Oh, great idea,” Matty ribbed him. “I’ll be the halfway-good dancer, you be the halfway-good guitar player. We’ll do a sketch.”

“At least we’d be warm while we’re being heckled,” Kevin shrugged.

Matty smiled. “Seriously though, man... you know what happened to Cam?”

Who didn’t? Cameron Riley, one of Kevin’s good friends, had been one of the top picks for the draft until his sudden heart condition. It had taken months to even diagnose, and by that point, it was way too late to get back into the game.

Rather, Coach Walker would have taken Cam back, but Cam had decided he was done.

“Of course,” Kevin nodded. “Rough, losing your job and your life like that all at once.”

Cam hadn’t suffered too much; he’d jumped into beekeeping, found a boyfriend, and moved into a commune-like situation with his brothers. Well, each of them had their own house, but to Kevin it was a little weird.

“You got a backup plan?” Matty asked, peering seriously between him and the sidewalk as they turned the corner and waited to cross.

Kevin shifted uncomfortably. “Not really. Seeing Cam... it did make



me wonder if I should come up with a backup career. I'll tell you right fuckin' now, if I lose this job..."

Matty grimaced. "God forbid."

"Yeah," Kevin nodded. "But I'm spending a year picking up some kind of skill and running with it. I'm not gonna sit around and watch my greatest replays."

Matty pushed open the pub door and held it for Kevin. "Me, too. Hope it doesn't come to that, though."

Kevin nodded, his eyes wandering around the pub furnishings. This was a cute little place—a mural of British gentlemen on horses with a pack of dogs, wearing silly top hats added a certain levity.

They grabbed a couple beers and relaxed into the button-backed benches of the place, the dark wood table adding an extra coziness to the atmosphere. It could have easily felt too stuffy for him at night, but it seemed like the kind of place that was a lot more casual in the afternoon.

"I don't know, though," Kevin shook his head. "I've watched you play. I don't think you have anything to worry about."

Matty half-smiled. "Everyone always tells me that, man," he laughed. "But bro, I don't know."

"Same here, though," Kevin shook his head. "Especially since nobody here knows me."

"Coach Walker wouldn't have chosen you if he didn't see potential," Matty said, and the utter confidence in his voice bolstered Kevin with a glow of pride. "The team's all glad to have you around, man. Don't worry."

"And *you* shouldn't worry, either," Kevin held out his bottle for a toast and clinked them together, drinking deeply. "You earned your spot."

Matty looked a little flustered, quickly scanning the other tables instead of looking at Kevin. "Thanks."

*He doesn't take praise well, then.* Kevin just nodded, changing the subject to draft picks. It was something they could talk about without even thinking as they drank a couple beers and let the ache settle out of their muscles.

Kevin wasn't even sure how much time passed before he realized it was getting into evening and he still had to pack for the week away, plus buy stuff for his buddies back home.

“And I gotta walk the dog.”

“What’s his name? Or her?”

“Jasmine.” Matty rubbed his head. “That was her name when she came from the shelter.”

“Jasmine’s a pretty name,” Kevin smiled. “And a shelter dog, too.” Matty slid up a few notches in his estimation once again.

They set off through the park, strolling easily side by side. It was a friendly kind of camaraderie that kept them bantering, jostling each other’s sides, sometimes bumping into each other and grinding shoulders for a pace or two before being shoved off with laughter.

As they reached Queen’s Park, Kevin leaned in and whispered, “Now’s your chance to make a difference.”

“Huh?”

“You can start a rally.”

Matty burst out laughing. “Oh, shut up. That was hours ago. You’re the clever type, aren’t you? Not gonna let anything go?” he winked.

“Definitely not.” Kevin came to a halt in front of the statue, not paying it any mind. Matty’s cheeks were flushed, his hair stuck up at odd angles. He stood with his weight shifted onto one leg, his hip stuck out and hand in his pocket.

Best of all, Matty’s eyes were on Kevin’s lips.

Neither of them said a word as they leaned in. It was fucking incredible, considering how much anxiety and worry and second-guessing he ought to have gone through first. Kevin *should* have been questioning it to the last second.

Instead, it was the most natural thing in the world to forgo the back-slapping bro hug.

Kevin’s palms were cupping Matty’s cheeks, while his hands landed on his back and hip. Matty wasn’t pushing him away, and he even angled his head just a little.

Their lips met with a burst of warmth and pleasure, Kevin’s chest and cock and even the tips of his fingers and toes all buzzing with excitement. Holy shit, *this* was what chemistry felt like. He’d half-forgotten, burying his urges under practices and homework of gameplay videos.

Just before Kevin tangled his hand in Matty's hair to keep him kissing him, he came to his senses.

*Holy crap. Ohhhh, no, I didn't.*

Kevin pulled back abruptly and raised a hand. He strode out of the park almost as fast as he could. It was all he could do to keep it to a fast walk and not a sprint.

*Shit, shit, shit. I hope I didn't just fuck this up.*

He hadn't just flung himself at the nearest guy to take him out for a drink and a day of sightseeing, had he?

Fuck, this was bad.

Matty

“Jasmine, don’t lick Fleet’s face. Bite his balls instead.”

“Matty!” Fleet laughed from the backseat, but he kept petting Matty’s dog anyway. “God, you asshole.”

Matty grinned unrepentantly. “She’s too nice, don’t worry.”

Fleet and his front-seat passenger, Derek, were second-years on his new pro team. When he’d heard they were both heading up to Sudbury, the halfway stop on his route home, Matty jumped at the chance to drive them both home.

It felt like a bit of infiltration, figuring out the team culture so he could join in as soon as their first events began.

“Prospects camp is coming up fast, eh?” Matty commented.

Derek nodded, turning to look back at Fleet so he could hear him. “Sure is. Everyone’s just beat right now, sure. Hoping we all get back in shape in time.”

“It’ll whip us back into shape,” Fleet laughed. “You were doing great at the gym the other day. Someone told me Glenn had you doing sleds.”

Matty almost beamed. “Yeah, he did! I nearly pissed myself when he told me. I’m the only guy—me and Kevin, rather—he told to do that yet.”

“You won’t be able to next year,” Fleet laughed. “Assuming we make the playoffs, of course. Like we will.”

“Duh,” Matty agreed easily, running a hand back through his hair. “I’m ready for it, I think.”

Derek grinned. “Good. Man, it’ll be a trip for your first year, though. You got any autograph-seekers yet?”

“One or two,” Matty admitted. “They caught me at the store, weirdly enough. Not even at the gym or anything.”

“It’ll get weirder,” Fleet promised him. “I mean, we’re not even big

names yet, and we're pretty popular. Especially with fangirls."

Derek laughed. "God, if I didn't have my girl back home."

"I keep telling you, long-distance won't work out."

Derek glared at Fleet. "It's going fine, thanks."

"Your loss," Fleet shrugged.

"Anyway, man," Derek changed the subject. "You gotta make buddies both in the team and not. Just keep yourself grounded, you know? It's easy to get swept up in half-a-million-plus salaries, and the intensity of the game and the season."

Matty laughed. "That show, Hockey Girls, or whatever..." It was some crappy reality TV show. He'd watched one episode before quitting.

"It's not far from the truth," Derek laughed. "What about you?"

"Nah," Matty shrugged. "I've seen what some of you guys go through." WAGs were a pain in the ass, from what he heard about. He made it a policy not to give advice, but guys still vented sometimes.

"At least hook up, though, man," Fleet encouraged. "What good's the jersey otherwise?"

They all laughed as Matty took the exit. "Where do you guys live, then?"

"You can drop us both off at mine," Derek told him, brightening up. "Man, those four hours went fast."

*For you two, maybe.* Trying not to think about or mention Kevin for four straight hours? Hah, *straight*. As if. "Yeah," Matty agreed anyway. He pulled into Derek's driveway and nodded. "Don't be too wild for your... wild vacation in Sudbury."

"We'll light up the town," Derek laughed, opening the door to pull his bags out. "Thanks, man." He reached forward for a fist bump, and so did Fleet.

Matty returned both fist bumps, then waved as they slammed the car doors to haul their stuff inside. Once they were inside, Matty backed down the driveway again, checking both ways before he pulled out onto the street. He rolled the windows down to enjoy a bit of fresh country air once he got to the highway again.

"Just us now, girl," he told Jasmine, laughing when she crawled through the seats to rest her head between the front seats. He let her

get away with that, as long as her paws didn't touch the front seat. Now and then, he scratched her head, but he always kept a firm hand on the wheel. This far north, anything could be on the road—tractors, moose, porcupines, the works.

Luckily, he only encountered a few semis, tractors, a deer that skittered away from the road, and a few porcupines who'd already unhappily met cars before his.

Matty stopped another hour in to let Jasmine out for a run and stretch his own legs, then climbed back in for the last leg of the journey, fresh and ready to go.

It was lonely apart from her company and his music. Even on a wonderful early summer day with the windows down and the music blasting, the silence grated on Matty after a couple hours. It would be incredible to have a best buddy to bring along with him on trips like this—not just one he walks, but one he could shoot the shit with, talk about all the hockey crap plaguing his brain, and so on.

Kevin was new and in need of a couple hockey buddies. Why not him?

Oh, yeah, *that* was why: he'd kissed Kevin like a porn star in the middle of a public park.

Matty groaned as he remembered it and rubbed his hand down his face, drumming his fingers on the wheel. Kevin had so much power over him now. He could out him to the press—first out gay major league player, that was bound to be a headline to remember.

But had Matty or Kevin initiated that kiss? It had felt a bit like being pulled into an inescapable orbit around him, gravity itself shifting towards Kevin.

He replayed the moment over and over in his head, trying to see it from different angles. It was possible Kevin was just as into Matty. He hardly dared to hope for it, but they *had* had fun hanging out that day.

Just before he reached Timmins, his tiny hometown, he got a text and pulled over to read it.

*Careful, I heard there's a truck accident on the road up.*

It was from Kevin.

Matty smiled, rubbing his face as he read the text a few times. Unless it was really bad, it wouldn't make news compared to 400-series highway accidents closer to the city. That meant Kevin had been

specifically searching for news.

How sweet.

Matty answered slowly, thinking through what he wanted to say.

*Thanks. Past the accident now nearly home. Ty for hanging out too, was fun yesterday.*

Then, to stop himself fretting, he tossed the phone into his cup holder, scratched Jasmine's head, and pulled back onto the road.

Though he heard his phone go off a few times with reminder notifications, he ignored it until he pulled into his parents' driveway and finally grabbed his phone again.

*You too.*

That was it? Shit, was Kevin pissed? Was this something he wanted to talk about?

Matty was lousy at figuring this shit out, but there was nobody else he could go to about it. It would just have to wait a week, until he got back to town and met up with Kevin for their week of buddy training.

## Kevin

All things considered, Floyd was looking pretty damn great compared to when Kevin had last seen him, mid-May. He'd seemed like a ball of nervous energy, but now he was quite pleased with himself. Why shouldn't he be? He had himself a goddamn boyfriend, some hot cop to boot.

Ugh. Kevin was going to wind up being the last single one in their group.

He held out hope, though. He'd never known Ryan—the strong, quiet carpenter type if there ever was one—to express an interest in dating. He was definitely gay, but he seemed to have other things to worry about, like his own carpentry business.

Fair enough, really. Kevin had been in that boat until he'd met Matty, who was in his own industry *and* perfect for him.

Kevin tried to shake off those thoughts as he drove to his parents' house. Even though it had only been a couple weeks since he'd last seen them for about half a day, he was looking forward to getting to stay with them properly.

"Hey, Mom and Dad. I'm home," he called as he pushed open his parents' front door.

"Kevin!" His mother was tall and broad-shouldered, a defense player in her own hockey days, and her hair was greying in elegant streaks. She was beaming as she crushed him in a hug and he laughed, hugging her back.

Then he hugged his father and clapped his back, hauling his bag into the house to let the doors close behind him.

"Welcome home," his father told him. "Come on through."

Once Kevin dropped off his bag in his old room—now the guest room, which felt weird—he headed back downstairs to chat with them.

"I'm barbecuing supper, if that's all right," his father told him. "Come on out."



Kevin followed his parents out to the porch and closed the door, grabbing a plastic deck chair to sprawl in with a can of beer. “So how are things?”

“Quiet without you and your brother in town.”

Kevin’s brother worked in Vancouver, so they only saw him every couple years when he flew out for holidays or special occasions like weddings. Kevin had lived in his own place, but at least in the same city until he’d moved to Toronto. It sounded like they had empty nest syndrome now.

“Aww,” Kevin frowned. “Are you at least getting out and doing things?”

“Oh, all the time,” his mother assured him as his dad flipped the burgers. “And I have my servant here to cook meals for me...”

“At your disposal, ma’am,” his father pretended to bow, heading in to grab the vegetables.

“What about you?” his mother asked.

When his dad came out again and started putting the foil-wrapped packets on the grill, Kevin nodded. “Great. Training’s been going fine—I’m a lot stronger already.”

“That’s great news. How about friends?”

Kevin chuckled. “Making a few of them, yeah. They’re all friendly, don’t worry about me.”

“Good,” his father concluded. “What’s your training routine like? Intensive?”

“About the same as at home, really,” Kevin told him. “Just, I do more of it at the gym now. One gym or another—there’s my trainer’s gym, and then a neighborhood gym closer to home that I go to when I don’t have to head uptown to his.”

“Right. So, I hear your friends are doing well.”

“Yeah!” Kevin sipped his beer and shook his head. “Mm, Floyd’s got a boyfriend now.”

His mother laughed. “So all of you are...?”

“You can say it, Mom,” Kevin teased. “We’re not allergic to the word.”

“Well... gay.”

Kevin nodded. "Pretty much. Some of them might be bi, I dunno, but most of us have boyfriends now. Except me and Ryan."

"Think that'll change while you're out there? Toronto's a bigger city."

"Mom, don't pressure me," Kevin laughed. "I'll find someone when I find them."

"I just don't want you to be lonely," his mother said.

His father nodded in agreement with his mother's words and Kevin's heart squeezed. It was touching that his family cared so much about him, especially when he looked at some of his friends. Chase's family actively hated him, and Floyd's family seemed neglectful to the point of abuse.

Kevin knew how lucky he had it, and he appreciated it every time he came home.

He decided to be painfully honest. "I don't know," Kevin admitted. "All my buddies—well, almost all—have settled lives now, you know? Meanwhile I'm getting ready to spend five to ten years, maybe more if I'm really good, doing *this*. Is this really the right choice? I wonder about that sometimes. I can't date while I play... I don't want to be the poster boy. Cam almost was."

"Right," his mother nodded, sipping her lemonade and gazing over the back deck before she looked back at him. "And being closeted isn't really a choice?"

"If I date, I want it public. I don't want to hide him—whoever he is—" here, Kevin tried not to think about Matty when he said *him*, "—from everyone. He'd deserve to be alongside me like any WAG."

"WAG?" his dad frowned while his mother laughed.

"Wife and girlfriend," his mother supplied. "We had those too, in my league."

"Carol!" his father laughed.

Kevin grinned broadly, fetching plates for his father to serve the burgers and veggie packets. "Yeah, hockey's a lot more gay at the local level. The further up you get, the less people want to talk about it. But they will."

"You don't think they'll react badly?" his father asked with a skeptical frown.

Kevin shook his head. "There'll be consequences, sure, but... there's a

lot of media attention, too. Nobody wants to be the di—uh, div deliberately boarding the newly-outed guy. And a lot of guys would accept having me on their team. Most guys get it.”

“Good,” his mother murmured and moved to the table, pulling a chair out of his father’s way for him to carry plates. “So you’re still worried about it being the wrong choice?”

When he talked through it, Kevin had to admit... not really. There were potential downsides, but nothing he couldn’t tolerate. If he dated another player, the schedule would be rough as hell, but long-distance wasn’t *necessarily* fatal to a relationship.

“I think you need to trust your gut instinct,” his father told him. “Don’t lose touch with yourself. You’ve always had a good, safe head on your shoulders.”

It was true—Kevin had never gotten into fights over his sexuality or been bullied like a lot of the guys he knew. Some of that was down to the older gay guys, a few years older than him, fighting their way up through the grades and teaching lessons the hard way. It wasn’t just that, though. The other reason was that Kevin knew when to stay quiet and laugh along.

He hated that he knew that.

After supper, the sun slowly setting in the west, they stayed outside to play Scrabble over wine and beer, the insect repeller running at full speed. A little drunk, a little buzzed just from being home, Kevin spent every minute his parents wanted to spend with him.

Finally, when it was dark, his parents retreated indoors to an early bedtime, and Kevin stayed outside a little while longer to enjoy the clear, dark sky. The last clouds had cleared, and it was going to be a crisp, dark, *perfect* night to see the stars out here.

He missed that about Toronto—the constant glow and smog made it hard to enjoy the sights of nature.

Matty would see similar sights up in northern Ontario, where the city receded into country, farmland, mines, and scrub brush. Matty had driven home yesterday, and he hadn’t addressed what had happened yet.

Kevin *had* to bring it up sometime soon. After all, Matty could well tell his new teammates about him, and he didn’t want that coming out until *he* was ready for it. But surely he had more to lose, right?

He chewed his lip, then pulled his phone out for a quick text, glancing

up at the first few stars starting to twinkle through the fading twilight.

*How are things going?*

It was just moments before he had a response.

*Great. Hanging out with family tonight, staying up late with beer. Talking to my cousins and bro too.*

Kevin half-smiled. That sounded idyllic, just like his own evening. And he was a family guy, staying home instead of going out with buddies.

*Yeah? Sounds sweet. My bro's out in Vancouver.*

*LOL is that why you wanna ditch TO for it?*

*Nah we'd get in each other's faces.*

It was true, too. They'd always grown up squabbling. Their relationship was better now that they weren't around each other in person to compete over everything.

*Younger or older brother?*

Kevin smiled. Matty was holding a conversation, so he wasn't completely turned off by... well, the slip in discretion. He answered quickly, wanting to keep him talking while he was here.

*He's older. Works in pharmacy tech out there now, something geeky.*

*Yeah my bro's an engineer at the mine out here.*

Kevin raised his eyebrows.

*So you have parents wondering what the fuck you're doing playing hockey instead of a respectable career?*

Matty's response made him laugh.

*Not now that I got called up ;)*

Kevin could only dream of that kind of salary. Right now, he was making enough to be comfortable, though, so he reminded himself not to get *too* greedy.

He just chuckled, then tapped his phone on his thigh. Now was the best possible time to bring up the kiss... but probably not directly. Neither of them wanted records of this.

Besides, maybe it would be better to do when he could see Matty's face in person.

*Gotta go we're playing Monopoly. God help us all.*

He laughed, then sent a quick answer.

*Good luck. See you man.*

The stars were twinkling brightly now, so he stayed out for an hour more just enjoying the sweep of bright specks across the whole horizon. When Kevin didn't hear from Matty again, he figured it was about bedtime anyway.

He wasn't waiting up for a text from a guy. No way.

Matty

“Hey, bro, gimme another one.”

Matty tossed a can over the fire to his buddy, Josh. Before leaving for Toronto, he’d sold his ATV, so he’d had to double up behind Josh to get out here with him, plus Lyle and Trevor.

Their coolers loaded with hot dogs and meats, marshmallows, beer, and junk food, they’d headed out here to build a bush fire and sit around drinking and talking. It was the perfect summer afternoon, as far as he was concerned.

Even if they were lathered up in DEET-loaded bug spray and had a couple citronella candles burning around the edge of the clearing to try to keep the mosquitoes and blackflies at bay. Ugh, he didn’t miss *that* part of being home.

“So, this party this weekend—you should hook up with Cindy. Girl’s gotten even more fine since you’ve been gone.” Trevor grinned at him.

That was the other part he didn’t miss. God, Matty sometimes wished he’d come out to his buddies back home before he left, just to avoid shit like this. But he’d known back then how risky it was with his career plan. It was a bit too late now.

Not that he thought any of these three would tell people maliciously, but... gossip spread, especially in a town this size. He couldn’t do it.

“Nah, man,” Matty laughed. “I’m not gonna be home much this summer and it’s even worse during game season. It’s hell on relationships.”

“I’m not talkin’ relationships, you know what I mean,” Trevor snickered while Matty and his buddies laughed.

“Naw,” Matty shrugged again.

“Oh, you got something a little better back in Toronto, do you?” Lyle elbowed him and Matty punched his shoulder in return.

“Yeah, maybe,” Matty laughed.

“What’re Toronto girls like, anyway?”

*Wrong guy to ask, buddy.* Still, Matty grinned at Josh. “Oh, just fine.”

After another laugh, talk turned to Trevor’s new girlfriend and Matty was out of the spotlight.

Somehow, Matty had figured they all knew by now. It was like he expected to open his jacket one day and accidentally shine a giant gay signal light out of his chest, alerting everyone when he talked to hot guys. It was a stupid fear, but years of worrying about every little brush of contact with the guys around him here had left him thinking that way.

And he’d never dated chicks out here. As far as they all knew, he’d just been busy with hockey—which was true—and waiting until Toronto—which was true, but not in the way they thought. That made him a bit of a loser, but they liked him and kept him around anyway.

Matty had the weird feeling they knew after all, but they were waiting for him to tell—that this conversation had been an excuse for him to talk. He kind of hoped he was right, because they’d accept him whenever he *did* tell the truth, but he couldn’t read more into it yet.

And speaking of Kevin... Well, he hadn’t been speaking or thinking directly of him, but Kevin’s face kept popping into his mind every so often anyway. He was just so cute and prone to wandering through Matty’s mind. He wanted to text him just to see how it was going, but there was no cell signal this far out in the bush.

Even if Kevin never wanted to kiss him again, Matty really wanted to hang out with him again. There was a kind of connection there he hadn’t felt in a long time, since sneaking around in high school with Danny before he’d left for Montreal.

And then Matty had dated briefly in Toronto—a couple months here or there, largely summer flings. Still, he’d never *clicked* in the kind of way where he could talk for hours just days after meeting a guy.

Fuck. He was really smitten.

## Kevin

The ride back to the airport was almost depressing, if Kevin really thought about it. He wasn't sure when he'd have another chance to come out. He was hoping to get out after a few camps. If he could catch another week with his parents before the weird road schedule of games, he'd be glad of that.

"Thanks for the ride, man," Kevin told Ryan. They hadn't really chatted even over the last couple days. It felt a little like he was drifting out of touch with his friends back here, but Kevin told himself that was ridiculous.

"No problem. I mean, everyone else is busy... canoodling with their boyfriends..."

Kevin snorted with laughter and grinned. "Jealous?"

"Nahhhh," Ryan drawled, but he glanced sideways at Kevin. "Are you?"

He totally was, then.

"Yeah," Kevin chuckled. "It's kind of nice to see, of course... but I also hate them. It's so easy for the rest of them, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess it would be," Ryan nodded. From what Kevin knew, Ryan wasn't fully out to his relatives, but he at least commanded respect professionally. He wouldn't lose carpentry jobs—probably—if he did come out. "Maybe a little jealous, then."

Kevin sighed. "It's not a big deal. I like focusing on work. It'd just be nice to have someone to come home to sometimes."

"Right," Ryan agreed. "I keep figuring I'll meet someone through my business, but so far, no dice. You never know, though."

"Ever consider moving out to Toronto or somewhere?" Ryan's brother was out there, so Kevin kind of figured he was hoping to.

To his surprise, Ryan shook his head. "I like it there. I mean, all the others—Cam and Noah, Jackson and Chase, Thomas and Alex, Chase and Greyson—Jesus, there's a lot of couples!" he laughed. "All the others proved it can be done."



“What can be? Living at home and meeting someone?” When Ryan nodded, Kevin nodded, too. “Ah, yeah. But there’s just more to choose from out where I am. Don’t write it off.”

“Oh, I’m not. I’m coming to Toronto Thursday to visit my brother, maybe see the city a little,” Ryan admitted.

“Really? You never said until now! Shit, man, you should crash with me.” It was kind of short notice, but having a buddy out would be awesome. Everyone had promised to visit Kevin, but somehow they’d never gotten around to it yet. He figured they probably wouldn’t. People were all talk and no action about that kind of stuff.

“My bro offered me an air mattress at his place, but I wanna see you for sure,” Ryan told him, then punched his shoulder. “We can be the sad singles at the bar, huh?”

“Yeah,” Kevin agreed with a broad smile. “That’d be nice.”

Once they pulled into the airport, Ryan helped him unload his rolling suitcase and backpack, then crushed him in a quick, strong hug. “Take care of yourself, man. See you Thursday, eh? Or Friday?”

“At least one of those should work for me. You take care of yourself too.” Kevin took a moment to look closely at him—he looked a little older, and though he was smiling, it wasn’t hard to tell he’d been more emotional than he’d let on in the car.

Kevin felt kind of bad. He did *sort of* have someone now that Matty was around, it was just... so tentative. And from their texts, it sounded like they were meeting up tomorrow.

He might be a lot closer to dating than he was letting on to Ryan. He just didn’t want to count his chickens before they hatched. He’d tell Ryan later—maybe Thursday, if everything went *really* well.

“See you, man,” Kevin waved, shouldering his backpack and rolling the suitcase into the little place.

Security was almost a joke—a single lineup snaking between glass waiting rooms. He was through before he knew it, choosing from the plentiful waiting room options. He opted to go right and pick up a coffee before his plane got there.

While he did, he browsed Matty’s Facebook profile. Matty had found his profile and sent a friend request yesterday—from an account with no photo and a slightly different name, no doubt to keep fans away. There wasn’t a lot on his profile, but Kevin recognized a few players’ names in the likes and comments on what he did have on his wall—

some vacation photos, a couple action shots, and some statuses about food.

Then he came across a pro photo of Matty and paused in his scrolling, his index and middle fingers hovering over the trackpad while he took in the details: the wisps of hair across his forehead, the flush in his cheeks of a good game, his stick in his hands, one skate just slightly off the ice as he prepared to step off. And his lips slightly parted... they looked so kissable.

God, his eyes were gorgeous. The photographer had focused perfectly on them, giving the photo so much depth.

Kevin realized he was staring like a fool and closed his laptop to drink deeply from his coffee.

*No ogling him until you talk*, he told himself, as much as that idea made his stomach sink.

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“Morning!”

“Hey,” Kevin grunted back at Hans and raised his hand, finishing his text message to Matty.

*Ready to work out when you are.*

Then he sent it and put his phone face-down on the table before rising for a quick back-slapping hug in passing on his way to the kitchen. “Hey, man. How’s it been?”

“Quiet without you around here,” Hans told him.

“Still not going home this summer?” Kevin felt bad for the foreign players, with family further away. Many came from families that had resettled to Canada, but not Hans. His family had moved back to Germany a couple years ago, and he wasn’t sure Hans had seen them more than a couple times since.

“Nah,” Hans shrugged it off.

Kevin’s phone went off and he headed back to the table with another portion of his smoothie to check it out.

*Meet at the bus stop in 30?*

Perfect. He answered quickly.

*Yep.*

“What’s up?” Hans asked, and Kevin quickly glanced at him.

“Sorry. Just arranging to meet up with Matty. We’re training together this week. Glenn wanted us to.” He said the last bit almost apologetically. Hans probably dreamed of working with Glenn.

“Ah,” Hans nodded. There was a moment of something like jealousy on his face, but he shrugged it off. “He seems to be taking you under his wing. It’s good to have friends in high places. And on your own team, of course.”

“Yeah,” Kevin nodded. “I’m pretty lucky. Okay, I gotta finish this and then get dressed. What’re you doing?”

“Nothing much. I have Final Fantasy,” Hans shrugged.

“Okay. Have fun with that,” Kevin laughed as he headed off to his room.

He left the house in a brisk stride, bringing his spare gym bag since most of his gear was still at Glenn’s gym. Once he caught sight of Matty lingering by the bus stop, all his nervousness about seeing him again was gone.

A grin spread across Kevin’s face and he raised a hand to wave while Matty waved back.

Matty pulled him in for a quick back-slapping hug. “Hey, bro! How’s it going? You didn’t tan at all.”

“You neither!” Kevin laughed, elbowing him before leaning against the bus shelter. “Man, I saw everyone, I think. Oh, I told Cam hi from you and he said something like *hi asshole, get out here and see me.*”

Matty burst out laughing. “Oh yeah, I will if I can!” he promised. “I’ll text him later. So, you ready to get ready for this camp?”

“Prospects camp?” Kevin had been trying not to think about it for the last week or more. “Sort of.”

“Don’t look so terrified,” Matty laughed, trying to ruffle his hair. Kevin flipped him off and smacked his hand away. “It’ll go fine. Man, it’s just a lot of drills and people watching and telling you how to get better. They don’t just want the best guys—they want guys who take direction and immediately improve.”

Kevin hummed. That actually made sense. “Right,” he nodded.

“And it’s a great time. All the camps are,” Matty shook his head. “It’s stupid fun.”

Kevin laughed. "Great." He climbed on the bus when it pulled on, flashing his pass and heading back to stand by the back door.

They hadn't discussed the kiss yet, but there hadn't been a good moment. He would soon.

By the time they were off the bus, they were in a friendly shoving match as they talked and tried to rustle each other's nerves.

They were half-wrestling when Kevin pulled back and held his arms up, laughing so hard he almost couldn't breathe, to signal peace so he could buzz them into the gym.

Matty grinned and winked at him, then put his own hands up before shoving them into his pockets. "You are *such* a younger brother."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Kevin exclaimed, his voice cracking from surprised offense.

Matty laughed loudly at that. "Nothing."

Kevin shoved him again before holding the door for him, and they headed into the gym.

This place wasn't completely filled with hockey guys, so it felt a little more private for a discussion like the one Kevin wanted to have. It occurred to him as they changed into workout gear in the locker room that it still might not be the best place, though.

The workout itself was easy compared to Glenn's, just warming them up with conventional machine exercises. Then they went through some bicep curls and deadlifts, dead simple stuff.

Then, at last, it was time to cool off again. "Conditioning while we cool off?"

"Sure," Kevin agreed to Matty's suggestion and moved over to the elliptical trainer with him, programming his machine to identical settings as Matty's.

Once they started, Kevin didn't have a lot of other places to look besides over at Matty or up at the TV. He waited for the commercial break. "Oh man. Reality TV."

He couldn't see a remote anywhere to change the channels, either. He had to talk to the gym staff about that sometime.

"Hey, I watch it sometimes," Matty snorted.

Kevin groaned. "Really?" Then, he shook his head. "Me too, though. I

watched that WAG program about Toronto...”

“Okay, that program was all bullshit,” Matty heatedly shook his head. “I mean, I don’t know the guys on this team really well, but I knew a couple of them... we all hang out the same places, you know. And when the crew was there, everyone was acting real different.”

Kevin hummed. He’d suspected as much. “But it’s fun to watch.”

“Yeah, that’s about all it’s got going, but... I’m a sucker for it, too,” Matty laughed. “Especially cooking shows.

Kevin groaned and kept his voice down. “I watch cake shows! How gay is that?”

Matty eyed him for a moment and Kevin winced and held a hand up in a half-apology. But Matty shook his head slightly, telling him it was cool despite Kevin’s burning hot cheeks. Matty told him, “I think any show’s just as bad. It’s all like junk food for the brain.”

“Yeah,” Kevin agreed, relieved to be let off the hook there. Sometimes he didn’t like what he laughed along with, and now and then something slipped out that he privately regretted.

That would be one big advantage of coming out—less expectation to say that kind of stuff.

But he pushed that aside.

“After we’re done, wanna come back to my place? Meet my roommates and Jasmine?”

“I dunno about your roommates,” Kevin grinned. “But I’ll meet any dog who wants to meet me.”

Matty laughed, his eyes sparkling. It was a healthy look along with his glowing cheeks, and it made Kevin smile. “I like the way your head’s screwed on, man.”

They headed back to the locker room, still jostling each other lightly, but they were both a little too worn out to go for a headlock.

The only thing Kevin was certain of going into this discussion was that Matty wasn’t *totally* uncomfortable with him.

A lot of guys would have backed off and kept two arms-length away from him forever after that kiss. But Matty hadn’t. Either Matty was the coolest, most accepting guy ever, or he’d loved that kiss as much as Kevin had.

And it didn't help that every time their eyes met, there was that tense crackling second before one of them smiled or made a joke or diffused the tension. Unless Kevin was horribly wrong, his second theory could well be right.

That chemistry would be *insanely* good in bed.

*Please let his roommates not be home and his dog... not be in his room.*

Matty

As he stood under the stream of hot water, Matty angled his body slightly away from Kevin's, as was polite. That didn't explain the way his heart raced every time he looked over, carefully keeping his gaze up on Kevin's face. He didn't normally have to keep his eyes up—he just naturally didn't want to see his teammates buck naked, hot or not.

That subtle difference was weird. Matty just liked Kevin, though. Kevin was nice and friendly, open, easy to be around, smarter than he gave himself credit for...

Matty just *really* wanted to be bros. Especially since Kevin seemed willing to overlook and play along with his awkward, clumsy, hella public kiss.

He kept going back and forth on why the hell he felt so weird around Kevin. Part of him knew how much leverage Kevin now had over him, but Kevin hadn't once hinted at it.

Fucking hell, this guy was willing to overlook the kiss, not even bringing it up to make him squirm from teasing embarrassment later? That made him kind of the best bro ever. Or maybe Kevin was that desperate for a buddy in the city now that he'd just moved here, which made Matty want to be friends even more.

He couldn't wait to bring him home and give him nachos and beer and introduce him to his roommates.

Matty scrubbed his pits and bits on autopilot, thanking God Kevin didn't try to talk so he didn't have to play the *your ass is in my peripheral vision* game.

Even if he wanted it to be. *Especially* because he wanted it to be.

Matty shook off his layers of thoughts, which were mostly useless bullshit speculation anyway, and stepped into his clothes. Kevin got dressed around the same time, and by the time he headed to the locker room door, Kevin was right there in his flip-flops alongside him.

"You're quick to get ready to go," Kevin told him.

“Yeah, with being the last one to leave the gym all the time,” Matty laughed. “Sometimes they really wanna lock up and go. You get good at fleeing.”

Kevin laughed. “I bet. You hungry?”

“Yeah. I got stuff for nachos at home, and some beer...?”

“Sold,” Kevin grinned. “Bus?”

“Yep, we should make it if we jog.”

The awkwardness of jogging in flip-flops made the next couple minutes fly by until they got on the bus and took their seats for the quick ride back to Matt’s place.

*I hope my roomies like him.*

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“Hey, man, you’re back already. Oh, hi, Kevin.” Fisher was right by the door when Kevin and Matty walked in, and he raised his hand to high-five them both. “Just worked out?”

“Hi,” Kevin answered with a smile. “Yeah, it went pretty good. Glenn’s routines are always intense. He had us doing deadlifts.”

“Ooof, this early? God, he wants you packing on muscle,” Fisher laughed. “Nice. The other guys are home, by the way.”

CJ, Chris, and Fisher lived with Matty. They’d had a fifth guy in the house, Nate—their token non-hockey-player—but he wasn’t home a lot over the summer. He hadn’t been home much lately, in fact. It was kind of worrying, but so far, he’d been paying rent.

When they got to the living room, CJ and Chris were sprawled in front of the TV while Fisher headed to pick up a book and crash in the armchair again. Jasmine was curled on her dog bed, napping, but she got up to greet them both, too.

Matty liked that Kevin knelt to scratch her head and greet her personally.

After their rounds of greetings, Chris nodded at Kevin. “You working him too hard?” he told Matty, shaking his head. “Shame. Give the newbie a season.”

“Nah, he can take it,” Matty smiled, and when he elbowed Kevin, Kevin looked pleased at the praise. “He’s gonna be a force to reckon



with. Okay, nachos.”

“Oooh, yes, please,” Fisher smirked.

“Not for you, loser,” Matty laughed. “I made you all pizza yesterday. You seriously ate your way through all of that?”

The three guys gave him guilty looks.

Kevin snorted with laughter. “Sometimes I’m glad my household’s pretty small.”

Matty and Kevin grabbed beers from the fridge, and Kevin sat at the counter while Matty got their nachos ready. They didn’t say much yet, listening in on the conversation in the living room—some gossip about the Zamboni driver at the local rink, and the running inside joke that he was actually an alien trying to infiltrate Canada from the least suspicious possible position.

Then, conversation turned to their weekend getaway.

“So are we doing this cabin thing or not?” CJ asked, crinkling his beer can and tossing it in the bin near the kitchen doorway.

Matty poked his head out. “Not at my parents’ cabin, that’s a hell of a long way away. Let’s get a cabin closer.”

“Yeah,” Chris agreed. “Not like we can’t afford it, splitting it a bunch of ways for just a weekend.”

Matty glanced at Kevin, who was looking away like he didn’t want to intrude or invite himself along. Idiot, of course he was getting invited. He elbowed Kevin. “Hey, you’re coming, too, right?”

Kevin looked surprised. “Yeah? I mean, yeah, thanks. Sure,” he nodded, his shoulders sinking in relief.

Hans wasn’t Matty’s favorite player—something had always been up with him, but Matty had never been able to figure out where his gut instinct came from. Still, he had nothing personally against the guy, so he shrugged. “You bringing Hans, too?” It seemed like a good idea to befriend Kevin’s friends, too, no matter what this weird *thing* turned out to be between them.

“I’ll ask him,” Kevin smiled, then nodded. “Thanks.”

“No problem. Hey, you wanna choose the next movie? They all have horrible taste.”

CJ groaned and Chris threw the remote at Matty’s head, so he

snatched it out of the air and smacked Chris's arm with it before handing it to Kevin.

As they settled down to shoot the shit while superhero movies played in the background, Matty relaxed and sprawled along the floor by the coffee table, watching Kevin relax equally.

This wasn't the intimate kind of getting-to-know-you he half-wanted with Kevin, but they had to establish a lot of things first. For now, that had to stay a kinda kinky, embarrassing fantasy.

Kevin finally told them he had to head out and shop for groceries, and Matty saw him to the door. Very aware of his roommates so close by, Matty reached out for an enthusiastic back-clap and handshake before waving goodbye.

The room seemed a little duller without Kevin in it. The moment Matty sat down again, Fisher looked at him. "God, it's about time you socialized with someone other than us. You were becoming a hermit."

Matty snorted. "Was not, shut up."

"You sort of were," CJ smirked. "But he's a cool kid. Reminds me a little of Cam. I can see how they got along well."

"Yeah," Matty agreed. "He wants me to visit, too. I'll have to try to get back this summer before the preseason starts."

"Shhh, it's just getting to the good bit."

Kissing, of course, with the obligatory hot woman. Matty rolled his eyes at the movie, but his buddies were into it, so he didn't comment. They all expected that kind of commentary from him anyway.

Though he often spoke too suddenly and loudly, he also called out a little more shit than guys wanted to hear, so he tried to keep it toned down around the guys he knew were cool.

He couldn't resist sneaking in one comment. "Of *course* she's gonna be kidnapped next scene so he can swoop in and save her. Princess Peach there."

"Shhh," CJ kicked him.

"Losers," Matty laughed, getting up in the middle of the kissing scene. He gathered empty beer cans to drop into the recycling by the kitchen doorway on the way to get another beer. If they were swapping looks behind his back, he didn't wanna know.

Kevin

Just as Kevin finished his morning push-ups and rewarded himself with a box of Smarties, Hans wandered into the kitchen. He was shirtless and in just his lounge pants, but there was zero appeal there. Unlike Matty, who could be fully-dressed and Kevin still always wanted to see him in less.

Somehow, every thought he had seemed to relate to Matty these days. Kevin resisted the urge to groan at himself.

“Morning.”

“Hey,” Hans answered, eyeing the chocolate. “That allowed?”

“Fuck off, they can’t control me... until next week.” Kevin grinned and dumped the rest of the candies in his mouth. They clicked and rattled around his teeth as he crunched through mouthfuls of hard candy shells and soft chocolate interiors.

“Where are you off to?”

Kevin raised his brows and pointed at his mouth. “Gwrfn aught wo mae.”

“Gross, dude,” Hans laughed and passed him to grab coffee.

Once Kevin swallowed, he answered, “Working out with Matty. You wanna come?”

“Nah.”

“Suit yourself,” Kevin shrugged, picking shell crumbs out of his teeth. “We’re off to the gym. Catch you later.” He grabbed his spare gym bag again, heading back to the bus stop to meet Matty.

It was weird, with Hans. He had less money, so he often complained he couldn’t keep up with Kevin’s training routine, making that a sensitive subject. But he was a member of this same neighborhood gym. He could come along on these sessions and let Kevin pass along what he’d learned. He just... didn’t. Far be it from Kevin to judge, but he seemed to be more interested in video games all summer.

Matty was leaning against the bus stop, and shit, he was hot. He had

one foot up, the sole of his shoe pressed against the bus stop glass. His thumbs were hooked in his pockets as he gazed off sideways across the street. White cords led up to his ears, and his bright teal t-shirt with a yellow print drew eyes.

It looked great on him, though.

“Hey.” Kevin waved sideways to catch Matty’s peripheral vision and laughed when he jumped. “Lost track of time?”

“I did there,” Matty admitted, laughing and pushing himself away from the bus stop. He adjusted his gym bag to the other arm and yanked out his earbuds, bundling them into his pocket. “Got here a little early.”

“Early? This time of day?” Kevin teased. “I like your commitment.”

Matty grinned, then turned to keep an eye down the street for the bus. “Ready to get big and hard today?” He threw a wink over his shoulder.

Kevin snorted with laughter. “At least one of those things.” He didn’t look away, though.

Then Matty glanced back down the street. “Here’s the bus.”

*Fuck, are we just not gonna talk about it? Apparently not.*

Kevin followed Matty onto the bus and hung onto the pole for the short trip to Patson’s Gym. This early in the morning, they might be lucky enough to have the gym—or one room of it—to themselves, at least.

They changed quickly into gym clothes once they hit the locker room, not saying much else. The companionable silence was something else Kevin liked, though.

After warmups, they moved to one of the weight rooms, which was usually quiet. This time of day, it was dead and would be until afternoon when the business guys who lived around here started getting off work. If any other players were there, not many of them were doing weights this time of year. It was their own little world where they got to practice bicep curls and make fun of each other’s toe raises.

“Okay, now for Glenn’s shit,” Matty told Kevin. “He wants us doing core strength exercises, too. We’ve been avoiding them.”

Kevin didn’t want to do the stupid sit-ups and planks and crap. They were boring in comparison to free weights, or the drills they’d be

running next week. But if Glenn assigned them, there was a reason.

He groaned, then dropped to his knees on the mat in front of the mirror. "Fine."

There was a moment where Matty stayed standing and Kevin glanced up at him, then became suddenly hyperaware that Matty was standing right by him, his crotch at eye-level.

Matty was suddenly sinking to his knees, looking everywhere but Kevin as he rolled onto his ass to assume a sit-up position.

*That* was interesting. Maybe he was feeling the same kind of click between them.

Kevin automatically shifted to grab Matty's ankles and hold his feet down as Matty folded his hands behind his neck and started crunching.

Matty's hair was all out of place again, his face already glowing with exertion. He got red so easily, which Kevin found adorable.

*Whoa, that's a weird choice. Kinda cute,* Kevin corrected himself.

Each time Matty's chest brushed his thighs, that brought him just inches away from Kevin, who was crouched by his feet.

And then Kevin's mind wandered back to a certain gif he'd seen online—a looping video of a guy sitting up, almost exactly like Matty was doing right now, and kissing another guy every time he came up.

Kevin's cheeks were instantly hot.

"What?" Matty laughed, his voice a breathless half-tone from exertion. His eyes were crinkled in amusement.

Kevin shook his head. "Nothin'," he tried to drawl, but Matty wasn't letting it go.

"Whaaat?"

"It's pretty gay," Kevin snorted with laughter, smirking playfully at Matty lowering himself to the mat. The word didn't mean anything. They were just horsing around... like guys did.

Matty sat up again, but this time, he didn't stop short of his knees. He leaned up and in, quickly pressing his lips against Kevin's. His lips were warm and smooth and... oh, Jesus, kissable.

Kevin's chest was hotter than his cheeks, his fingers itching with the urge to pull apart Matty's ankles and scoot up close to him and kiss

the *fuck* out of him...

"This gay?" Matty teased, his breath warm on Kevin's lips. His eyes were open, focused on Kevin's despite their short distance.

Kevin was still almost breathless as he wrinkled his nose. "That's pretty gay, dude," he laughed, but he didn't pull back.

He didn't necessarily want to discourage Matty. Plus, if it was a game of gay chicken, backing out first would make him the fucking loser here, and he didn't do losing.

And maybe Matty *wasn't* just kidding around.

Kissing once? That was kind of a big thing, even if it was so short a kiss it might as well have been a Quebecer's "see you tomorrow" kiss.

Kissing twice?

There was something here. Kevin just couldn't put his finger on it, but boy, did he want to.

Matty's lips were moving—counting down to ten to the end of his rest break, Kevin realized as soon as Matty lay back again.

On the tenth sit-up, this time, Kevin leaned in impulsively across Matty's knees, his hands still tight on Matty's ankles, to kiss him open-mouthed.

Matty's chest was heaving for breath, but he kissed back hard, their lips and tongues mashing in a quick, fierce spilling over of whatever the fuck they were holding back around each other. Kevin was positive Matty could hear the pounding of his heart, even if he wasn't the one working out right now.

The sexy fuckin' sound of kissing and heaving breath was all they could hear, though Kevin was so wound-up he was a coil about to snap from listening to the hallway.

Matty sucked Kevin's bottom lip and swiped his tongue across it, and then Kevin slid his tongue against Matty's lips, teasing at the tip of Matty's tongue and licking his way into his mouth...

Then, he pulled back abruptly, so fucking sure he'd heard footsteps. His lips were flushed and his cheeks probably were, too.

Matty was watching him, the tension in his face nothing Kevin had ever seen from guys fucking around with him like guys did.

He was worried—scared, even—about Kevin's response.

So Kevin just winked. “More like *that* gay,” he told Matty, who cracked up laughing.

“Your face is—” Matty started, and Kevin let go of his ankles, sending him lurching backwards. “Hey!”

Kevin grinned. “Sorry,” he pretended to apologize.

“Your turn then, loser,” Matty shoved Kevin, and then...

They were both laughing. Kevin was flat on his back on the mat, Matty kneeling by his side above him. The light behind and above Matty made his blond hairs glow, his face bright and teasing and ruddy red from his sit-ups. His lips were still wet from their kisses.

And Kevin was *not* going to get a boner, he just wasn’t—not in the middle of the gym, please...

*Those* were definitely footsteps.

Kevin pulled his feet towards him and pressed them hard into the ground, blocking his view of Matty with his knees as he laced his fingers behind his head.

Whoa, that wasn’t helping. Matty’s fingers were around his ankles, holding him down. Almost boner material right there, let alone everything else that had just happened. Kevin pulled himself up into a first, sloppy sit-up. His form was terrible, but whatever. It would give his cock a little time to settle the *fuck* down against his thigh, thanks very much.

By the second or third sit-up, he’d pulled his spine straight, and he had a quick glance over.

Hans was rounding the corner of the doorway, looking first into the room across the hall, then into theirs. “Ah, there you are. Hey.”

Kevin’s heart sank. That was the end of their flirtation for the day, then. “Thought you weren’t coming!” He flopped back on the mat to look up and over in his direction.

“Nah, me too. But it wouldn’t kill me to get on the machines once in a while, I figured,” Hans shrugged, his gaze flickering between the two of them. “Hey, Matty.”

“Hey.”

Kevin watched Hans move over to the hip abductor. When his gaze returned to Matty, Matty gave him a quick nod, but that playful rogue was gone. This was all-business Matty, working out like it was his job.

Which it was—for both of them. Sure, he got enough time off in the summer to handle all his adult life affairs like dentistry and taxes, and see his buddies when they flew into Toronto, but he still had to stay fit.

Kevin restarted his sit-up count at zero.

Once they were done with sit-ups, they planked for as long as they could handle, then moved over to the yoga mats to stretch.

None of them said anything yet. The weights clanked up and down on Hans's machine as he grunted through his exertion, and Kevin and Matty's joints cracked now and then as they stretched out their bodies from head to toe.

A couple minutes later, Hans exhaled an audible, "Whew." He was leaning back on the bench, taking a moment's breather.

Oh, yeah. Now that Hans was around, Kevin remembered the other thing he didn't *really* wanna ask his roommate, but he should. "Hey, Hans. Dude, Matty and a couple of his buddies and I are going to a cabin this weekend." He glanced at Matty to confirm the invitation was still sound. "You wanna come?"

"Yeah," Matty chimed in. "If you want, there's room for one more."

When Kevin twisted around for a look, Hans was sitting up and wiping his forehead. "Nah, man. I'm meeting up with a bunch of our team to practice this weekend. Last weekend before camp, ya know? Thanks, though."

"Yeah, yeah, that's cool," Matty waved it off. "Just thought I'd offer, man."

"Thanks, man," Hans automatically answered.

Kevin's body ached as he slowly pushed himself to his feet. "Well, Jesus fuck, b'ys, that's it for me."

Matty burst out laughing. "You going Newfie on us now? You from there?"

"No, no," Kevin laughed. "But I got a buddy or two who's rubbed off on me."

And by buddies, he meant his ex-boyfriend, who'd gone to university out in St. John's. Their last year had been long-distance, and on the rare occasions they'd gotten a chance to get together...

Yeah, he *had* rubbed off on him.



Kevin's cheeks were hot again as he strode for the weight room door. "See you, Hans. Be home later, maybe after supper."

"Kay," Hans answered bluntly, his voice short as he hauled down on the pulleys he tightly gripped, his breath coming in quick pants. "See you."

Matty raised a hand and followed after Kevin to the locker room.

With a couple other guys around, Kevin didn't dare make a move on Matty in the shower, even teasingly, to try to get a feel for his chances.

Instead, he waited until they were dressed and strolling through the gym lobby.

"I gotta split today," Kevin told Matty with a reluctant smile. "Gotta get my teeth fixed up."

"Yeah? I did that a couple weeks back, and I'm doing taxes now," Matty laughed. "God, our lives are weird."

"It's our own calendar," Kevin agreed, holding the gym door open for Matty as they stepped out onto the sidewalk and walked to the bus stop. "Spring cleaning happens in summer."

Matty snorted with laughter. "Nicely put. Okay, I'm grabbing a bus here."

"I'm heading off that way."

"Cool. Okay."

There was a moment there that they hadn't had with Matty's roommates around. Kevin honestly wasn't sure whether to go for a back-slap, a handshake, a hug...

...Or a kiss.

Matty's eyes flicked down to Kevin's lips.

But no fucking way. Not in front of the gym, with Hans around and probably other players. And a couple people waiting at the bus stop here, some stepping forward towards the curb.

Kevin glanced down the road—the bus was approaching.

When he looked back at Matty, the moment was gone and Matty just slapped his shoulder. "Good luck with your teeth, man. They look all right, though."

“Thanks.” Kevin laughed at the weird compliment, but he’d take it.

“I’ll give ‘em something to do if you like.” Matty pretended to punch him in the mouth like they were on the ice and the gloves were off.

Kevin laughed and shoved him off him, so Matty shoved back, and Kevin braced himself.

*Oh, my God. We’re like teenage boys.*

The bus was slowing down now, so Kevin just leaned in for a quick half-hug. “Catch you later. I got a buddy visiting tomorrow, so I might bring him along.”

“Cool,” Matty smiled, but there was a flicker there—disappointment?

Shit. Maybe he wanted to *properly* make out.

They could make time for that... and space. Kevin would find a way. Kick Hans out? Invade Matty’s place until all his roommates were out? If Matty said the word...

But instead, Matty raised a hand and stepped onto the bus, and Kevin was left watching after him like a forlorn lover.

*Fuuuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. He wants to be alone with me.*

Kevin couldn’t handle the way that made his heart hammer with joy.

## Ryan

As much as Ryan complained about his little brother's choice of city—he worked as a realtor in downtown Toronto now—he had to admit, Eric had a pretty sweet place. Only problem was, he was usually working too much to enjoy it.

Ryan had chosen the complete opposite career path when he went into the trades. He'd always enjoyed working with his hands and building stuff, and when he figured out that there'd always be a demand for those services, it was a no-brainer.

Now that he was out of his apprenticeship and working on his own on building sites, his own job sucked up a little more time than he'd thought, but he couldn't complain about his wages. And he still built things at home for fun, and sometimes to sell on the side. He'd taken a long weekend to see his brother here, but Eric had to work today.

Luckily, Kevin lived here now and had instantly agreed to pick him up, show him to Eric's place as long as Ryan knew the address, and hang out that afternoon before his brother was off in the evening. Apparently Kevin was off to the cabin with some friends this weekend, but at least they'd catch each other today.

"Hey!"

Ryan glanced around until he located Kevin's cheery grin, then laughed as he moved in for a quick hug by the luggage carousel. "Hey, man. How's it going? Long time no see," he joked.

"Nah, it's like I saw you last week," Kevin grinned. He looked good, though. Even more than last week, Kevin was glowing with life.

They were all happy for him, that he'd gotten his dream job out here. Well, one league down from his *dream* job, but still a comfortable one. But was there more than a job going on here? Kevin looked... bright.

Ryan usually didn't say much. He was a lot happier to let everyone else do the talking while he just watched and listened. He picked up a lot that way. "You're looking happy," he commented, though, unable to resist.

“Yeah. Almost training week,” Kevin laughed. “And I’m where I wanted to be, training-wise.”

“Great,” Ryan approved. He kept an eye out for his suitcase, and once it passed by, he grabbed it. “Where we headed?”

“Over to the ferry, then a streetcar. You got your brother’s address?”

“I’ll text you it.”

They pulled out their phones for the silent exchange, and then Kevin squinted at his phone. “Ohhh yeah. Okay, no problem, that’s close.”

“It looked like it on the map.” Ryan still wasn’t too familiar with Toronto. He’d only been out here on vacation a couple times as a kid, and to visit his brother a few times. He didn’t really leave Fredericton much, honestly.

Walking through downtown Toronto was a little overwhelming for Ryan. Crowds were in general, actually. He stayed close to Kevin as they headed over to the ferry bridge, then boarded the boat.

“So, how’s it been going with everyone?” Kevin asked.

“In the last week?” Ryan laughed.

“Just in general.” Kevin cleared his throat as he leaned on the railing, glancing out across the Toronto harbor. “Feels like everyone’s on the other side of the world sometimes.”

Ryan winced in sympathy, casting his mind around their group of friends for things Kevin wouldn’t have heard. “Let’s see... oh. Oh, Jesus, that’s right.” His big news of the week—but could he share it?

Nah, Noah wouldn’t mind.

“What? What is it?” Kevin pressed, picking up on Ryan’s excitement.

“I’m making a custom ring box for someone...”

Kevin’s eyes went huge. “No shit. Who?” he exclaimed. The way his face worked, he was running through the possibilities.

Ryan almost laughed at the look on his face. “Noah.”

“No *shit*,” Kevin breathed out, and Ryan did laugh this time. Kevin was clearly both delighted and shocked. “He’s proposing? When?” His voice almost cracked from excitement.

Ryan snorted with laughter. “I don’t know, man, he won’t tell me. He just said this summer.”

“Oh my God, that’s... that’s so cool,” Kevin laughed. “Wow. Christ. I guess they’re an item now, then.”

“They all are.” Ryan tried not to sound jealous. The doors were closing, the ferry almost on the move. “I mean, most of us are getting really... settled in.”

“Except you, obviously.”

“And you,” Ryan returned, but watched Kevin closely. “I assume.”

There was a second of hesitation from Kevin that said more than his following words. “What? Yeah, I mean. Uh... well...”

Aha. Ryan smiled slightly and let him talk.

“I mean, there’s someone I like,” Kevin admitted after a long few seconds of contemplation. “But shit, it could get complicated.”

Ryan was curious, but not if Kevin wasn’t ready to share yet. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Nope, not ready to talk, then. “Hey, you wanna come to a practice later this summer or something? You coming out again this year?”

“I thought I did that a couple years back,” Ryan smirked.

Kevin groaned but chuckled. Any coming-out joke mandated at least a chuckle from their little group of friends—tight-knit enough to be family by now, even the ones not apparently marrying soon.

“I was thinking this fall, actually. Cam wants to come out to see all his old buddies on the team, and watch one of your home games. Especially you and Matty.”

Kevin jolted slightly. “Oh yeah! Of course.”

“You met him already, didn’t you?” Ryan asked. “Seem like a nice guy?”

“Well, if he’s friends with Cam,” Kevin shrugged, and Ryan had to agree. Cam was a pretty good judge of character about everything except his boyfriends. Thank God he’d lucked into meeting Noah. “But yeah, he’s cool. We’re working out together. Glenn wanted us together because we both have the same work ethic.”

“Obsessive gym nerds, then,” Ryan teased. It wasn’t like he never hit the gym himself, but most of his tone came from hauling lumber and shit around, not daintily pressing on machines.

Kevin laughed sheepishly. “Pretty much. Man, good to have you out,

though. We'll grab lunch as soon as you drop your stuff off at your brother's, and then... the gym?"

"That sounds great."

Ryan smiled out across the harbor as the ferry coasted to the city shore. If he only had a couple days in Toronto, he was gonna make the most of them. And maybe spy on Kevin a little, like everyone back home wanted him to do.

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"Oh, Jesus."

It was only half an hour into their gym workout and Ryan regretted making fun of Kevin's weight machines.

It wasn't like he couldn't handle the weight—Kevin was being careful not to get him hurt. But this was just a different kind of pull. Or, in this case, push, since he was lying flat on his back, raising a weighted machine board with his feet.

Kevin laughed as he hovered nearby, ready to spot him if his knees gave way. "Almost there. Don't stop. Push harder."

"Jesus, go get laid," Ryan laughed, rolling his head back as he slowly raised and lowered his feet again, starting to count backwards in his last set.

"You too, you dick," Kevin snorted with laughter. "Oh come on, you can go harder than—don't. Dude, don't make it weird." But Kevin was laughing loudly now, covering his face with his hand.

Ryan tried to keep his breathless laughs under control until he got that last painful raise and lower out of the way, then locked the bar and lay back on the bench for a hearty, quick laugh. "You said it, not me."

"Did I pass the test, then?" Ryan slowly sat up, ignoring the burn in his calves.

"With mediocre colors," Kevin smirked and came around the machine.

Ryan flipped him off. "You come lift a load of lumber out of a truck bed and see how far you get."

"No thanks." Kevin ran a hand back through his hair and chose the machine next to him, setting it up for chest work instead. "Speaking of, how's work going?"

“Good.” Ryan figured he should elaborate a little more. “Just finished roughing out a new place. By the time I’m back we’ll probably be on to the next house. The growth in town is crazy. You saw all those new suburbs and developments going up.”

“Yeah! God, you must be up to your eyeballs in work.”

Ryan laughed. That was pretty accurate, actually. “This summer’s gonna be nuts. But I was thinking more about doing custom stuff, too... I don’t wanna be tied completely to builders. They can go bankrupt or stop developing or whatever. And I like piecework... it’s relaxing.”

“You go home after a long day of sawing shit and you go saw shit for fun?”

“Hammer shit together, or sand it, or varnish it...” Ryan trailed off, then snorted. “Yeah, okay, fine.”

Kevin chuckled. “No, that’s cool, though.” Ryan moved around to spot him as he lay back on the bench and gripped the bar. “You’re thinking you might sell some of your stuff?”

Ryan nodded. “I mean, Noah came to me about the ring box... I’ve been doing stuff like trunks, coat racks, all kinds of weird little things. It’s actually been a lot of fun,” he admitted.

“You’re good, too. You can sell your stuff no problem,” Kevin told him.

The praise made Ryan smile, though he knew Kevin was right. He took pride in the job he did. “At farmer’s markets?”

“Why not? Cam’s boss does great,” Kevin shrugged. Cam worked for his soon-to-be fiancé Noah’s uncle at an apiary, and according to their story, they’d first met when Cam bought some of Noah’s honey. Of course, everyone had had to heckle them about *that*, but they insisted it wasn’t a euphemism.

“Yeah...” Ryan trailed off, dubiously. “They got a couple carpenters there already.”

“So? You can sell at Christmas fairs, too,” Kevin told him. “People go apeshit for real, handmade gifts. Especially as good as your stuff is. And at least one of the farmer’s markets will take you, guaranteed. I bet if Noah’s uncle puts in a good word for you...”

“All right, all right,” Ryan laughed. “I’m thinking about it. Just, I won’t have time this summer—or probably even the fall or winter.”

With the ground frozen and nigh-impossible to excavate for new foundations, that was the season for interior work. “Not to work for other people, then come home and do stuff, and then somehow find time to advertise and sell it...”

Kevin blew out a breath as he carefully put the bar back down, then stretched out and rested. “Ooof. Hmm... You could hire someone.”

“Like, to build for me?”

“Nah, to do all the other shit,” Kevin shrugged. “Stick to the stuff you know and like.”

“Now you’re a business consultant?” Ryan laughed.

Kevin slipped out from under the rack and winked. “I’ll charge you for my advice unless you take it.”

“*Unless?*” Ryan laughed. Clever little bastard. “Yeah, yeah,” he waved him off.

Kevin slapped his shoulder, then turned. “Oh, hey, Hans.”

A light-haired guy in the back corner nodded at them both, his eyes flicking to Ryan. Ryan wasn’t sure he liked him—even though the guy had no reason to *dislike* him. That was kinda weird.

“Hans, this is my buddy from Fredericton, Ryan. Ryan, my roommate.”

Oh yeah, that was where he’d heard the name. Ryan smiled and jerked his head in a quick upnod. “Hey, man.”

“Hey.” Hans glanced between them, and now Ryan’s suspicion about what he was thinking was confirmed. “This your buddy?” His accent was German.

“Yeah, my buddy.” Either Kevin didn’t notice what he was implying by asking again, or he didn’t give a shit. Ryan noticed and he didn’t appreciate it, though.

“Cool,” Hans concluded simply.

Ryan nodded back at Hans, then stepped out of the room to head for the locker room while Kevin had a word with his roommate.

Now he could see one of the potential complications Kevin had hinted at.

*But you can’t let everyone around you stop you from living your life, man.*



Ryan tried to ignore the sinking recognition in his own stomach. It was always easier to see things in other people than himself.

Time to hit the shower and head for food with Kevin. They still had an afternoon to enjoy—platonically, whatever Hans thought—before Eric was off work and ready to hang out. Hopefully Hans wasn't around, because Ryan planned to enjoy it.

Matty

“You ready for the weekend?”

“Oh, yeah.” Kevin slammed his gym locker shut and turned to face Matty, beaming at him. He looked like he hadn’t gone to a cabin with buddies... well, ever. “I’m all packed.” He slung his gym bag over his shoulder, and they strolled out of the locker room towards the bus stop for the quick ride down the street.

“Aren’t you an eager beaver?” Matty teased, which made Kevin crack up. He liked making Kevin laugh, though. “I’ll swing by your place to pick you up at like eleven.” He didn’t like driving downtown in Toronto, but going out of the city was fine.

“Eleven? Okay, cool.”

They still hadn’t talked about the damn kisses—any of them. Matty had to catch Kevin alone sometime this weekend. It was gonna be a bit awkward being like “do you wanna kiss me again or were you just fucking with me?”, but it was better than leaving it unspoken and continuing to make out unexpectedly in public.

When they went their separate ways, Matty clapped Kevin’s back and half-hugged him, which was all they seemed to be goddamn doing these days. “See you in a bit.”

“Later, man!”

By the time he got home, Matty had *almost* stopped thinking of what it would be like to casually kiss Kevin goodbye. He pushed the front door open, trying hard to stop thinking about Kevin’s cute little smile and the way he watched him with bright, attentive eyes when he modeled the exercises the way Glenn wanted them to do them, and...

“Hey, Matty.” From a quick glance at the pile of shoes by the door, everyone else was out, but that was Fisher’s voice. “I made lunch.”

“Sweet, thanks, man. Did you get the meat?”

“I sure did. Did you?”

Matty’s eyes widened as he came around the living room corner.

Fisher was grinning broadly. “What the fuck, man?” Matty exclaimed with a laugh, slapping Fisher’s stomach on the way by.

“Ooooh. Sorry,” Fisher snickered. “But you’re ditching us for him a lot lately.” But from the way he said it casually, he didn’t seem to be *actually* asking the question underneath that. “Have you finally replaced Cam?”

Matty rolled his eyes. There was no *replacing* Cam, obviously. CJ and Fisher were probably best buds the same way he and Cam had been. But then Cam had to go get himself a heart condition and move to the Maritimes. Sure, he had plenty of buddies around the teams, but there was nothing like having a guy you shared all those midnight wings and six AM practices with.

“Maybe. Glenn was right, he works hard.”

“Good,” Fisher approved and pulled open the fridge to start loading up the cooler with beer while Matty sat at the kitchen table to wolf down the pasta Fisher had made.

Fisher’s first name was Fox, but he hated it so much he’d get aggressive when anyone said it, so they all just knew him by his last name. A lot of people didn’t even know his real first name. It was like that in hockey sometimes—guys got slapped with dumb nicknames, or there was already a Matt or Chris around, so they had to go by Matty or CJ.

It was weird they didn’t have any Kevins around besides this one. Matty knew a few Kevins around his age. None of them had made it up to this level in the last few years, though.

“Speaking of Cam, I wanna go to Fredericton and surprise him later this summer. Since he can’t make it out during bee season,” Matty said.

Fisher laughed. “Bee season.”

“It is,” Matty laughed. “Until, like, fall.”

“Right.” Fisher closed the cooler with a thud and stepped on it to click it shut, then pulled open cupboard doors. “You’re so bereft without him.”

Matty snorted. “Shut up, Mr. *I’m gonna cook for CJ’s turn every week instead of making him learn for his damn self.*” He brandished his fork at Fisher. “Bereft?” Matty added after a moment. “That’s a fancy word for you.”

Fisher pretended to throw the marshmallow package at Matty's head and Matty grinned. "Whatever," Fisher told him. "I meant as a friend. You *know* what I meant."

"What, unlike you and CJ?" Matty cleaned his bowl out with bread, then finished that off, too, and downed a few gulps of pop. "When's the wedding?"

Fisher laughed again, louder this time, and rummaged for their stash of s'mores chocolate bars. "We'll have a joint wedding with you and new guy. Kevin."

"Perfect. Cam can be our flower girl."

Fisher laughed. "What's his boyfriend's name? Noah?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

"He'll be the ring bearer, then. Perfect. Now we just need someone who doesn't suck on piano."

Matty scrunched up his face in thought as he washed up his lunch dishes. "Or guitar. Drums...?"

"Rock band: wedding edition."

"Yeah," Matty laughed, drying off his hands. "Don't mention it to Kevin 'till I get a chance to propose, though. Might be awkward." He headed upstairs to pack.

"You got it, man," Fisher called out after him.

Matty tried hard not to admit to himself that his heart was thudding at the thought. He'd had a dozen conversations like this over the last few years. Bromances were dime-a-dozen here.

It was completely fucking normal.

His glow of nervous excitement about this guy he barely knew yet, he'd locked lips with maybe three times?

That really wasn't.

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"Hey, Kev!" Matty rolled down the window as he pulled up in front of Kevin's building. "You want backseat or front?"

"Hey!" Fisher protested. He'd already claimed dibs on the front seat. "I'm shotgun."

Kevin laughed. "That's fine. I can take backseat."

Chris slid over into the middle, next to CJ, leaving room for Kevin in the third seat. Poor Jasmine was sprawled across CJ's lap, but she didn't mind. "We won't even make you go in the middle."

"O ho ho," CJ loudly laughed. He was quickly joined by the other guys, even Matty and Kevin.

Matty pretended he didn't see the flush on Kevin's cheeks as he opened the back to throw his bag in, then came around the side.

Then, Matty double-checked that the door light was off and everyone was belted in and they were off to the races.

"How's it going?" CJ asked, leaning forward to see Kevin around Chris.

"Not bad," Kevin told them. "Just talked to my parents on the phone. They're missing me already."

"Oof. Wait for the season," Fisher winced.

Kevin chuckled. "Everyone keeps saying that."

"It's pretty hard," Matty chimed in, glancing to Kevin in the rearview mirror. "But it's not *that* bad, as long as you're emailing or sending videos or whatever. Time zones are really the worst part. Especially being three hours away—four for you—when that happens."

Kevin nodded. "Can't wait for prospect camp, though. They start off with medicals, right?"

The rest of the car was eager to tell Kevin all about what to expect, from the medical to drills and expectations. Matty stayed quiet to focus on getting them out of downtown and onto the 400 north to Georgian Bay.

By the time the Toronto skyline fell around them into massive subdivisions, then housing co-ops, then flat fields and the long, straight stretch north, they were discussing pizza places.

"No, you're crazy," Kevin scoffed. "That's the *worst* delivery I've had yet."

"Which place did you call? You never call the downtown one."

"Oh, shit," Kevin exclaimed. "Really? All franchises are supposed to be the same. That's the point of a franchise."

"Yeah, well, they aren't," CJ laughed. "You'll learn real fast."

Matty smiled to himself, staying out of the conversation for now. It was just nice to hear Kevin getting along fine with the rest of them already.

Not that he'd expected any less. Kevin was easy to get along with, and so were the rest of his buddies.

The lake closed in on the left before long, peeking through gaps in trees. Matty kept a close eye out for their exit, then the dirt road they had to follow down to the dock.

The owner had left the keys for the boat and the house in a steel lockbox. Matty punched in the code and grabbed the keys, then went to pick up his own bag from the back while the guys grabbed theirs, plus the coolers and supplies. He'd had his boating license for years, so the owners were happy to let them have it without a lesson as long as they paid a deposit.

"It's not that far away, really," CJ was marveling. It had only been a couple hours' drive from Toronto, and the time had flown by.

"No, this is super-close. I wish my parents were this close," Matty laughed.

"Me too," Kevin said, which made Matty feel instantly guilty. At least he *could* drive out to see his own family over the weekend if he had a really bad week. Kevin brushed it off by grinning across the lake, though. "Holy shit, we got great weather."

It was supposed to be clear all weekend, with maybe some cloudy patches one evening, but no rain. That was fine by Matty.

"Yeah," Chris cheered. "C'mon, someone, grab the other end of this."

Between them, they carted their stuff down to the boat, got it started, and piled in. They tried to stay more or less balanced, keeping about half of them on each side of the boat. Kevin seemed like he had good sea legs, but CJ stayed sitting down firmly as Matty gradually pushed the throttle.

It didn't have a strong engine, but it was good enough to get them over the water towards the dock and the blue-sided lake house looming into view beyond.

Matty relaxed as he approached the dock at a careful putter, steering into it until someone could hop ashore and moor the boat.

The cabin looked beautiful even from the outside, they had lots of food, and they had a whole weekend to themselves. As long as he

didn't kiss Kevin in front of everyone, it was gonna be just fine.

Kevin

“I got this last one.”

What the hell did they need three coolers this size for, anyway? Kevin assumed they had an insane stash of beer in at least one of them. Even with his strength, it was hard to heft, which meant they had ice in it too.

Kevin hauled it up the short staircase to the deck—one of this place’s two decks—and through the open sliding glass door.

“May as well leave this one in the corner. Save the fridge for food, leave the beer in the coolers?” CJ suggested, but nobody was really listening. Chris was exploring the living room while Fisher was glued to the glass windows wrapping around to show an almost 180-degree view of the lake and Matty was trying to find the wi-fi password.

“Sounds good,” Kevin approved of CJ’s plan. “Jesus, does this one only have beer?”

“Yeah,” CJ laughed. “There’s five of us, man.”

“Yeah, good point.”

CJ grabbed his bag and Fisher’s, and Kevin recognized the signs of a bedroom scuffle. He eyed the other guys and picked up his own backpack again.

Then CJ was off like a shot for the staircase with an unashamed little boy’s grin. “Dibs on the biggest room!”

“Oh, fuck,” Matty exclaimed, putting down the router and trying to step out from behind the TV. “Not fair, you asshole.”

Kevin smirked and trotted upstairs after CJ. While CJ turned left, he went right towards the door at the end of the hall.

As soon as he pushed it open, he was sold.

“Whoa,” he breathed out, gazing around the room. There were two single beds, but more importantly, a whole bank of windows overlooked the lake—as every window in this place seemed to, since there weren’t many trees on this little island. The wall was practically



glass.

Kevin dropped his backpack on one of the beds, noticing an open ensuite bathroom door, but making a beeline for the window.

“Oh man, you scored the good room.” That was Matty from behind, in the doorway. When Kevin turned to grin at him, Matty nodded towards the other bed. “Mind if I take it?”

“Sure,” Kevin agreed quickly.

Chris was coming upstairs behind them. “So I get the third one, whatever it is? To myself? Yeah, fine by me.”

“Oh, shit, you had that planned all along!” CJ laughed from the room down the hall.

“He’s a tricky bastard,” Matty snorted. He tossed his bag on the other bed, then joined Kevin by the window for a sec. “Wow, this is... gorgeous.”

The few trees framing their view had green buds on them, and at this level, they could actually see a bird’s nest tucked into one of the branches, almost hidden by a flush of new growth. The lake beyond was calm, the wind still low.

“Come on, guys. Food time,” CJ called out.

Matty gave Kevin one of his trademark gorgeous smiles and then turned to lead them both out of the house, down to the deck where the guys were putting together sandwiches and distributing beer cans.

Kevin tried not to watch Matty in his hot henley shirt and beige shorts as he lounged on a picnic bench, laughing at the guys’ jokes and pushing his hair back and just...

Being adorable.

God, Kevin had to get it together. Even being jammed in the backseat with two guys had done nothing for him, but standing next to Matty overlooking a romantic view?

His chest was tight with excitement, and he pulled out his cell. Wow, the reception was crap out here—not even 3G. Even GPRS was struggling out here. That was fine, though. This was just a relaxing island getaway weekend... the less Facebook, the better.

Kevin took a beer from CJ and cracked it open, then busied himself helping CJ make sandwiches for them all. The rest of them dragged chairs around the picnic table and set it with placemats and pitchers

of ice water.

It was easy to join in their casual banter as they ate and washed up the few dishes, then headed down to the dock with lawn chairs.

“Swimming already? Jesus!” Kevin laughed as CJ came out in board shorts. “Do you hate yourself and want to cramp up and drown?”

“That’s a rumor, dude. Urban legend.”

Kevin clicked his tongue. “I’m not counting on it.”

“Hey, can I have your TV?” Chris joined in.

“I’ll take his computer,” Fisher agreed.

“Fuck off, all of you.” CJ braced himself with a deep breath, then took a running jump off the edge of the deck and cannonballed into the water, sending the rest of them scattering.

Within half an hour, everyone but Kevin and Matty was in the water, and Matty sat on the edge with his legs in the water.

Instead, Kevin stretched out on a deck chair on the dock and stripped his t-shirt off to enjoy the nice sun and summer heat. Maybe he could pick up a bit of a tan.

Matty was shirtless, too.

Kevin was *not* looking over at him. Lying back with the sun in his eyes sounded preferable to getting a hard-on for Matty while in shorts with everyone else watching.

They were talking about a player he didn’t know, so Kevin laced his fingers behind his head and pushed his sunglasses up his nose, then leaned back in the deck chair.

This was the good life.

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The afternoon hours crawled by, and at last, Kevin figured it couldn’t hurt to get a little water. He headed inside for another beer and to change into swim trunks.

He didn’t bother closing the bedroom door before he stripped off his shorts and underwear to step into his swim trunks.

Of course, *then*, he heard the patio door slide open and footsteps on the stairs.

Kevin nearly tripped over his shorts and banged his shin on the edge of his bed in his haste to yank up the trunks, since he had a horrible feeling he knew who it was.

Sure enough, he was right.

“Hey,” Matty greeted, recoiling for a moment in surprise. “S-Sorry,” he added in a quick, staccato laugh. “You good?”

“It’s cool, bro,” Kevin answered automatically.

“Enjoying it?”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s good.” Kevin folded his shorts and underwear and shoved them into his backpack, then went to take another look out their gorgeous bedroom window. “Great spot here.”

It only took a glance down at the water to see everyone else still hanging around the edge of the dock, which meant they were definitely alone in the house. They weren’t even looking at the house at all, too invested in some kind of passionate discussion which had CJ slapping the water.

“Fantastic,” Matty agreed quietly, walking up beside him. Kevin finally spared him a quick look, then glanced a second time.

Water droplets still trickled down Matty’s back, his shorts damp, but he’d been sitting out of the water for a couple minutes so he wasn’t dripping all over the house.

Instead, he was at that gorgeous stage of water beading along his skin, his skin shining with a healthy sun-kissed glow. And he was muscled, a couple scars running along his chest and side.

“Fights?” Kevin nodded at one of them. Then, his cheeks turned hot. He’d pretty much admitted he was staring at Matty’s hot body.

Matty smirked slightly and looked out the window again, then glanced up and down Kevin. “Yeah, that one was,” he pointed at his side. “A skate.”

“Ouch.”

“The other’s not from the ice.” Matty stepped a little closer, his eyes catching and fixing on Kevin’s now. Those beautiful eyes held a question, too.

Kevin thought it was something like *do you want this?*, but he wasn’t sure. He swallowed and held his ground as Matty stepped closer, and then...

Matty's hands were on his sides. This was way more than a friendly move.

Kevin leaned in to press a quick, hot kiss against Matty's lips, his dick stirring with interest as his chest heated up instantly.

A nearly-naked, wet guy whose trunks were clinging to the outline of his dick grabbing him around the waist and pulling him in? Uh, yes, please.

More importantly, it was *Matty* pulling him in. His hands rose to run over Matty's damp shoulders.

Then, Kevin's breath caught in his throat and he darted a quick sideways glance out the window before trying to pull back again. Matty's hands were firm around his waist still, though, keeping him in place.

"D'you mind?" Kevin muttered.

"They wouldn't give a fuck, and anyway, they're not looking."

Kevin's heart pounded. He let Matty keep him in his hold—he wasn't clutching him so tightly Kevin couldn't break away anyway. He leaned in for another kiss or two before his nerves started to grind at him again.

Once again, Matty kept him close, his expression curious. His lips were still parted and moist, his eyes dark with lust as he watched Kevin.

Kevin's cheeks flushed with heat as he rubbed his neck. "Shut up."

"I didn't say anything," Matty chuckled.

Kevin kissed him once more, finally taking the time to focus on *kissing* him instead of trying to kiss him and dart away again. When he focused on Matty's face up close—those long lashes, his full lips, his smooth skin interrupted only by the rough stubble along his jaw...

God, he was *gorgeous* up close.

And Kevin wanted a lot more of this. But Kevin couldn't help but ask, "You sure you don't mind?"

"If they see, they see. Whatever," Matty murmured. "We've been drinking. We've all seen our buddies do more when they're drunk."

Kevin laughed under his breath and shrugged his agreement. "They wouldn't out us or...?"

Us. It was a weird word considering they hadn't actually talked about what the fuck this was becoming, but it seemed too early to assume it was going anywhere at all.

Matty shook his head slightly, his expression warm. "They're cool. They would never."

Just having Matty's word that they were cool was enough to set Kevin's nerves at ease. He nodded, stepping closer to Matty and away from the window to face him properly and slide his arms around his waist.

They were touching more now, Matty's thigh sliding between Kevin's as their bare legs rubbed, their stomachs touching... Then, Matty's damp chest pressed against Kevin's, and Kevin was certain Matty could feel the way his heart pounded with arousal as he leaned in to press their lips together in a hot, wet slide of lips on lips, tongues clashing again and teeth clicking with how hard they both went in for the kiss.

His whole body was tight with *wanting*, and he was gonna need to jump right into cold water now, but he gave in to the impulse to run his hand up that strong back and over his shoulders, then up the back of his neck to tangle in that thick, soft-looking hair.

God, Matty's hair felt amazing to run his hands through, but better yet were the hot lips against his own and the way Matty was softly panting into his mouth, moaning in the back of the throat every time Kevin ground their hips together, both their cocks half-hard now.

"Okay, we gotta..." Kevin laughed breathlessly, pulling away from Matty and trying desperately to catch his breath. If he didn't stop now, he was gonna need a lot more than making out.

Matty laughed breathlessly, too, and raised a hand to run through his hair, unintentionally giving Kevin a flash of that strong bicep behind his head. For half a second, he looked like he belonged in a magazine.

No, it was too late to just jump in the lake. Kevin was gonna need the bathroom.

"I'll head down," Matty offered, even though his eyes were raking up and down Kevin's body before fixing on his face again.

It was unspoken: wait a couple minutes before coming out. Don't be too suspicious. Even if Matty didn't care if his buddies found out, neither of them wanted to answer *those* questions.

Kevin jerked his chin in a quick nod. "Yeah. Cool, man." He turned

tail to flee for the bathroom. Waiting a couple minutes wasn't gonna be a problem. It'd take a couple minutes to jerk off anyway to the fresh body memory of Matty's strong hands on his hips, the flat ripples of his stomach against his, the knee between his legs, the half-hard cock rubbing against his own through their swim trunks...

Now that he'd had a taste of Matty—and such a fucking *good* one—he wasn't sure he could control himself around him for a whole weekend.

Matty

Fisher was gutting fish.

It was all Matty could do to resist the pun, but from the way Fisher kept eyeing him every time he flicked his knife along a fish's spine, he knew exactly what he was thinking.

"Sorry!" Matty laughed. It wasn't just the name pun bugging him, to be fair. Fisher was also taking his sweet time—Matty could do it faster. He'd gone fishing a lot around home a lot.

"Oh, is Fisher not done gutting fish yet? Jesus, for your namesake you're fuckin' slow," CJ called from the back deck.

Fisher groaned, but he joined in laughing with Matty and CJ. "I've *never* heard that before. Congratulations. Brand new idea," he called out.

A minute later, he had the last few fish pieces ready to slide onto the plate. "All done?" Matty asked.

"Yep. Go bring 'em to that asshole."

Matty snorted with laughter and brought the plate up to the grill on the deck. "Here you are, asshole," he cheerfully told CJ. "Your boyfriend sent these."

CJ fluttered his lashes. "How romantic!" He threw them on the grill, brushing them swiftly with oil while Matty went to check on Kevin and Chris. There were already sausages, potatoes, and corn loaded onto the grill, so there wasn't a lot of prep left to do.

Chris was kicking back at the picnic table while Kevin tossed a salad. All day, he'd been trying to make himself useful—from carrying coolers to making sandwiches for lunch and bringing more drinks down to the dock for them all.

Matty was dying to pull him aside and tell him he didn't have to try so hard, but he hadn't really had a chance to get him alone since that kiss not long after lunch.

After that, he and Fisher had gone to the other dock—the old one, on

the other side of the little island—to catch these fish for supper while the others stayed on the newer one so they didn't stomp around and disturb the fish. And then it had taken a while to get supper ready, and... they just hadn't had a moment yet.

Not like that moment earlier. Jesus Christ, that was hot, and he couldn't let himself think about rubbing up against that gorgeous body for more than three seconds at a time.

That was the end of *this* three seconds, so he distracted himself by calling out, "How long 'till everything's done?"

"Maybe five minutes?"

"Oh, jeez. Almost there then. Okay."

"Good," Kevin spoke up, scooping the salad bowl under his arm to carry out to the back deck. "This is done, too."

"That's it for inside, then." Matty shut the door on the way out to keep the slightly cooler inside air in, then helped serve up supper.

They talked about random shit over supper as always, but Matty kept sneaking glances at Kevin. He seemed relaxed enough, despite how skittish he'd acted earlier when he'd thought everyone would stare up and through the trees at their bedroom window while they were kissing.

It was a given that Kevin was partly closeted, but it seemed like maybe he cared even more than Matty about maintaining that, despite playing at a lower level. Matty just hoped Kevin's helpfulness wasn't from being worried he didn't fit in or that they wouldn't like him if they found out their secret.

After supper, Matty stuck around to do the dishes while everyone stayed up late talking in the living room. Tired though he was, he determinedly stuck it out as, one by one, the other three guys crashed and headed to bed to sleep off their big, late supper and busy day of relaxation.

That left just the two of them, at fucking *last*, to talk and... well... do whatever.

Matty's heart jolted as he nodded down to the dock. "Wanna head out for a bit?"

"Ready to fend off the black flies?" Kevin countered with a laugh. At night, they wouldn't be nearly as bad as they were at dusk, but still...

"I got a citronella belt clip thing." Matty patted it. "We're good within



fifteen feet.”

“Jesus, that’s smart. I want one,” Kevin grinned. “I guess I’ll stay closer than fifteen feet.”

*I want you a lot closer than that.*

Matty swallowed and grabbed his t-shirt, shrugging it on before he pulled open the patio door. “Après-vous.”

“Ohhh, the formal. What’d I do wrong?” Kevin laughed.

“You remember high school French?”

“Who fuckin’ doesn’t,” Kevin groaned rhetorically, sliding the door shut after them.

They wandered down the steps to the dock where they’d spent most of the day. It was quiet now aside from the incessant backdrop of crickets and frogs along the banks. It was a constant, high-pitched song, but Kevin associated it with things like this—camping with buddies and quiet fireside conversations.

“We gonna do a bonfire tomorrow?”

“Fuck, yeah,” Matty answered. “There’s a fire pit down the other side of the island there.”

“Perfect.” Kevin dropped into a chair and stretched out, wiggling his toes.

Matty smiled as the movement caught his eye, then dragged the deck chair right next to Kevin’s and sat in it.

“Stars are already coming out.”

Matty leaned back for a look, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness. “So they are.” There weren’t a lot yet, a slight hazy layer of clouds obscuring part of the sky, but that seemed to be blowing off as it darkened. He could see a couple constellations, at least. “Pretty out here.”

“It is,” Kevin murmured. “Don’t often get to do this.”

“Not during the summers?”

“Nah. I was usually in town working, to pay for tuition or whatever,” Kevin laughed. “Or pay for camps, gear... you know how it goes.”

“Yeah,” Matty murmured. “It’s not easy. I worked a part-time job during school too, ’till I came here.”

“What year did you leave?”

“Second year.”

Kevin whistled under his breath.

Matty laughed quietly. “Not ‘cause I’m awesome or anything. They were just desperate.”

“I dunno about that, man. Your Wikipedia page says otherwise.”

This caught Matty off-guard, and he laughed a short, sharp sound that made Kevin flinch with surprise. “You Googled me?”

“Fuck yeah, I Googled your ass before I came to a deserted island with you.”

Matty snorted. “What’d you find?”

“Not as many gay rumors as I thought.”

That made Matty smirk, at least. So they were slowly coming around to the subject—but neither of them seemed to want to bring it up yet. “Everyone’s pretty careful not to point a finger until there’s proof.”

“Mmm.” Kevin gazed off across the water, and Matty stole the moment to look at him—the moonlight framing those sharp cheekbones and his firm jaw.

God, he was so damn beautiful. Matty hoped he didn’t wreck his face playing this fucking sport.

Then, Matty wondered if he was thinking of someone. Had he had boyfriends before? How quiet would they stay if and when Kevin got big?

“It’s rough, not getting these moments a lot,” Matty offered to give him the chance to talk. “Especially not having a lot of buddies outside the game.”

“Yeah. You get a whole new family inside it, but you lose everyone outside,” Kevin agreed with a quiet chuckle. “I’m lucky I’ve got a second family, pretty much... Cam’s buddies... but other than that, not a lot of friends anymore.”

Matty nodded. “And as you move up, it’s that slow cull of everyone from the towns around you until you’re the only guy you know from your city, huh?” He was the only one he knew from Timmins around his age, though there were some older and one or two younger guys, too. And aside from Cam and now Kevin, he couldn’t think of anyone

else from Fredericton.

Not that that mattered too much—once you were on a team with a guy, you could become almost kin with him by the end of a season.

“Really sucks when they’re gone because you kicked their ass,” Kevin murmured.

Matty was startled into another little laugh. “Yeah. I know, though.” It sounded egotistic, but when you were one of the better players in the draft... well, it set up tensions.

“God, it’s just a life of its own,” Kevin murmured, then finally glanced at him. “But it’s worth it so far. How are you finding it?”

Matty leaned forward a little and braced his elbows. “It’s good. It’s... it’s a lot like you’re used to, but *more*. Just more intense, a lot more media and fan attention, more pressure, more violent on the body...”

Kevin nodded silently.

“This time next year you’ll be in just as rough shape as I was this summer. Hopefully even worse-off if you get to the finals,” Matty grinned. “But yeah. Finding someone who understands that is... hard.”

It was a silent, tentative gesture, and Matty could see how fucking nervous it made Kevin: he put out his hand to rest on the arm of Matty’s chair.

How goddamn sweet.

Instantly, Matty covered Kevin’s hand with his own, running his thumb down Kevin’s.

And almost instantly, his brain went into overdrive: why the hell should he get close to this guy when he might not even be around that long? He could get traded to another team, he could lose his spot before the season even began, he could get sick, and then that would be long-distance hell.

But he took a deep breath, then slid his hand under Kevin’s.

*And I don’t even know him, not really, even though I Googled him probably just as much as he Googled me...*

Matty let his shoulders sink and the tension drain from his body again when Kevin didn’t pull back. He had to give this a shot.

Their fingers tangled, their eyes locked, it was hard to say who made the first move. Both of them leaned across the arms of their chairs,

their hands now firmly gripping each other's as they twisted sideways to make the connection.

Lips met lips. Matty was getting to know how Kevin tasted, and even better, how he kissed.

Kevin's kisses were slow at first, tentative, like he wasn't quite sure that he was welcome. Once Matty had been kissing him back for a few seconds, his kisses were deep and sensual, his lips moving with precision along Matty's to suck or nip at just the right spots.

Matty burned with heat, his fingers running along Kevin's, but Kevin squeezed his hand tighter.

They broke apart to gasp for breath, both laughing under their breath even though nothing was that funny.

Matty just felt a *glow* in his chest that he didn't know how else to express. And his dick, but he knew exactly how to handle *that*... preferably roughly.

The mental image of his swim trunks hauled down, Kevin pressed up behind him with one strong arm around his waist like earlier, his other hand jerking his hand up and down Matty's shaft as he pressed those beautiful pink lips against the soft spots behind Matty's ear...

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*, he wanted that so bad he almost couldn't breathe.

"Yeah," Kevin breathed out, his voice hoarse for a second and eyes hazy. Christ, were his thoughts as dirty as Matty's right now? Then, he cleared his throat. "Yeah, we probably shouldn't..."

"Make a habit of this? Kissing in public?" Matty grinned.

"Have we ever *not* kissed in public?" Kevin laughed, and Matty joined in. They dropped hands as they rose to their feet, pushing back their deck chairs.

Then, Matty's smile faded slightly as he watched Kevin's expression. *Do you want to?*

But he didn't dare ask it yet.

He wasn't sure he'd earned the right to.

"I'm heading in to bed," Kevin murmured after a second, finally blinking and glancing away at the stars again. "Staying out?"

"For a minute," Matty nodded, his chest tightening. No way could he

jack off with his buddies right there inside, but maybe he'd jump in the water for a late-night swim if this burn in his stomach didn't fade. "Be there soon. I'll try not to wake you up."

"Okay. See you."

Matty waited until the purr of the patio door shutting faded, then glanced out over the water once more and let out a long, slow breath.

*Something* was going on, and every time he tried to screw up his courage to address it, he found himself with one thought on his mind: maybe Kevin just didn't want to label it. Worse yet, maybe he was so closeted he didn't want to think about it. Pushing him too hard now might mean they never found out how good they could be together.

They'd only met a couple weeks ago, for fuck's sakes. It wasn't like they'd been playing this game for years, but even days felt like too long to wait now that Matty had had a taste of him.

*This weekend*, he promised himself. *Even if I have to talk to him on the fucking boat on the way back. I'll find a way.*

When his boner had subsided enough that he knew he wasn't gonna make a pass at Kevin, Matty hauled himself to his feet to head in and get some sleep.

Kevin

The smell of bacon tickled Kevin's nose. He stretched slowly, rubbing his face against cool-smelling sheets. That was weird. That was definitely not his usual laundry soap.

Oh, *yeah*.

He cracked his eyes, shielding his eyes against the light spilling in between the wood slats of the blinds. The wall of windows was too bright for ordinary blinds to hold back the morning sun on a day as gorgeous as this one had to be.

Then, his chest jolted. He jerked his head around so fast he nearly strained his neck, glancing over at the other single bed.

Matty was asleep on his front, the covers mostly pulled over him, but one arm was stretched out above the pillow.

Kevin swallowed hard, dragging his gaze off the way the covers rippled around his body before he could start to imagine what was under which ripples in the blankets.

Instead, he hauled the covers off himself and grabbed a fresh change of clothes, then let himself into the en suite bathroom to get ready for the morning. At least with all the time they were spending in the water, he didn't feel like he had to shower, and neither had he brought his razor. He'd deal with being a little bristly today.

Matty still wasn't up by the time he left the en suite, so he headed straight downstairs to the kitchen.

"Morning," Chris greeted. He looked like the only one up so far. "Sleep well?"

"Yeah, like a rock. You?"

"Same," Chris told him as he approached the fridge. "I'm doing bacon and potatoes, eggs, sausages, uh..."

"Toast? I can do toast," Kevin laughed. "Are they almost up?"

"Oh, yeah. Good one. Yeah, I'll dump cold water on them if they're not up within a couple more minutes. I heard a lot of angry grunting

from CJ and Fisher's room, though."

As he loaded the toaster with bread, Kevin chuckled. "So, you been out here before?"

"Oh, no. I've only been living here a couple years. Last summer I spent pretty much the whole thing with my family."

"Where you from?" Kevin hopped onto the counter and sat there, swinging his feet now and then. Chris had an American accent, but he couldn't tell what kind.

"Nevada."

"No shit. That's a long way away."

Chris chuckled. "Yeah, I know. Got traded up here, and... I dunno, I kinda like it. All the snow's a nice change."

"From the desert? I think we'd all trade you," Kevin laughed.

Chris chuckled. "Yeah. You're from Fredericton like Cam, right?"

"You were all good buddies with him, weren't you?" Kevin asked, kicking the drawers lightly with heels before he hooked his toes in the drawer handle. "Everyone won't stop asking me about him."

"Sorry," Chris laughed. "Yeah, he's a real good guy. Not all guys leave that kind of impression on you."

Briefly, Kevin wondered: had Cam dated any of these guys? Had he dated Matty? That would be weird. But he pushed aside the thought and half-smiled. "Yeah, he is. He warned me about Coach Walker."

"He'll be a hard-ass, but only 'cause he wants to see you get better."

Kevin nodded. "I appreciate that."

There were footsteps on the stairs, and Matty appeared a moment later in almost identical beige shorts to yesterday's outfit and a white shirt with faded pink and orange stripes. With flip-flops and a fishing rod, he'd look like an obnoxious straight frat guy, not the guy making Kevin's fingers tingle with the memory of his.

Matty had nice, strong hands.

*Fucking hell, I'm gay.*

"Morning," Kevin said, feeling like he'd been staring for minutes even if all of that had flashed through his head in seconds.

"Hey," Matty greeted. "Breakfast almost done? Need me to go scare up

CJ and Fisher?"

"Nope," CJ hollered. "Be right there."

Matty frowned in disappointment. "Fine, I won't." He jumped down the last three stairs, then swung around the bannister and strode over to grab himself a plate. He had a few moments of not really looking at Kevin, but once he glanced his way a couple times, that passed.

Realizing he'd been watching Matty a little too long, Kevin tore his eyes off him and went to do the same. By the time they'd served up their own breakfasts, the other guys were downstairs and following suit.

Kevin only noticed how relaxed he was at the end of breakfast. He was joining in conversations more now, and it felt like they welcomed him as a buddy, not just Matty's friend.

After breakfast, they headed down to set up their fishing rods by the lake. Kevin wasn't that interested in fishing himself, but he was fine watching the others. They all scattered across the island—CJ and Fisher on the old dock, Chris on the new dock, and Matty on the shoreline.

Kevin joined Chris first, shooting the shit. He wound up staying for an hour or two before heading over to join Matty, folding lawn chair under his arm.

Once he had it unfolded and plopped next to Matty's, he leaned back and stretched. "How's the fishing?" He leaned over and looked in the bucket—nothing so far.

"Slow today," Matty shrugged and yawned. "No big."

"Cool."

Matty was sprawled across his chair, his legs out at odd angles, his arm stretched over the arm of the chair, hand on the top of the tackle box.

Kevin drew a slow breath, then reached out to cover Matty's hand with his own for a few moments. When Kevin glanced at Matty, Matty's eyes flickered to him. He gave him a slow, quiet smile that just about melted Kevin's heart.

"All right?" Matty asked simply.

"Yeah," Kevin hummed and closed his eyes for a few moments. This was the most affection he dared initiate in public, but Matty turned his hand over so their palms nestled together and that was enough for



him.

More than enough.

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“Ohhh, look at my muscles, bro.”

“My biceps are bigger than yours.”

“I do a hundred one-handed pushups every morning.”

Kevin couldn't breathe from laughing at the mocking Matty was enduring from his buddies. All he'd done was announce that he was doing his daily workout in the house for the next bit, if anyone wanted to join him.

Everyone else was in the water, splashing and shaming him, except Kevin, who stretched out on the dock with his feet on the water and laughed until his stomach hurt.

“What did I ever do wrong?” Matty lamented, trying to grab the edge of the dock to haul himself up.

“Where do we start?” CJ tried to hook his finger in Matty's waistband.

Matty slapped his hand away and laughed. “Fuck off, all of you. If you wanna work out, I'll be in the house. Training season doesn't stop just 'cause it's sunny today.”

“I'll come,” Kevin offered and pushed himself up from the dock. Finally, maybe they could... talk about some of this. Like the fact that Matty's eyes kept glazing over every time he looked at Kevin in his swim trunks.

The two men wandered up the short flight of stairs to the back deck, walking slowly to let themselves dry off before they got to the house.

“How's it going, then?” Matty casually asked Kevin. “Liking it out here?”

“Yeah, it's pretty sweet. Everyone seems friendly.”

Matty smiled. “Yeah, they like you. I knew they would.”

“Cool,” Kevin laughed, giving Matty a quick smile of relief. “Always weird being the new guy.”

“Yeah. That's why I wanted you to come along this weekend,” Matty nodded. “They'll keep an eye out for you.” He pulled open the patio

door to let them both inside.

At the same moment, they breathed sighs of relief and enjoyment. The air conditioning wasn't great here, but it was still less humid than baking on the dock, plus a few degrees colder.

Matty was still damp from the water, and he started to shiver almost right away.

"Nippy?" Kevin teased.

"Yeah." Matty rubbed his arms and chest.

Kevin laughed and reached out to tweak one of Matty's nipples. They were hard as diamonds. When he rubbed it, it only softened slightly under his touch.

Matty laughed, turning to face Kevin and step towards him. He ran his hand up along Kevin's side, his eyes catching Kevin's. In a heartbeat, it had gone from two friends being buddies to...

To whatever this was.

"Nipple," Kevin murmured, then flicked the nipple with a fingertip.

Matty couldn't stop the gasp that parted his lips and made his eyes go a little hazy as he tipped his chin up.

Oooh, he was sensitive, was he? Kevin was going to enjoy this.

Kevin cast a quick glance out to the patio, but nobody was even in sight nearby. Through the slats of the porch railings, he could faintly see the outlines of the other guys bobbing around the water still.

Reassured and emboldened, he stepped close enough and leaned to press a kiss over one of those hard nipples, rolling the other between his fingers while he gripped Matty's hip tightly.

"Hnnh," Matty sighed, his nails digging into Kevin's back. "Oh, fuck."

"That warm you up a little?" Kevin murmured, his hot breath ghosting across Matty's nipple.

Matty laughed breathlessly and nodded. "Fuck, yeah. Jesus, let me work out first, or I'll..." he trailed off.

"Be tempted to skip your workout?" Kevin teased, letting go of Matty and stepping back again with just a brush of his lips across Matty's shoulder. "Okay. Tell me what we're doing."

He loved that it took Matty a few seconds to focus his eyes again and

adjust his swim trunks. "R-Right. Pushups." Matty dropped to his stomach on the floor, bracing himself on his toes.

Kevin smirked and followed suit, mirroring Matty as he moved through the usual routine. Watching Matty's muscles flex from head to toe as he worked on his biceps, triceps, abs, and core strength was pretty much Kevin's idea of a perfect afternoon.

And holding his feet down while he did those crunches? Kevin smirked at the memory of their stolen kisses in the gym, watching Matty's cheeks flushing steadily more red with exertion.

Once that was done, it was on to the final plank, and he stretched out alongside Matty, tensing up his whole body. That wasn't hard; his muscles naturally wanted to tighten with arousal.

He curled his fingers into his palms so hard the nails bit into his skin. Maybe Matty didn't want to hook up in a lake house with his buddies just down at the end of the dock.

It was really fucking hard to focus on that when the rasp of Matty's rough breathing kept digging into his self-control, chipping away at the flimsy restraint.

Especially when Matty breathed out, "Three, two, one... done," melted against the floor, and turned that dark gaze on him.

Kevin nearly lost his breath as he met Matty's gaze, rolling slowly onto his side before sitting up. His muscles ached, but that faded as fast as blinking when his cock demanded attention again.

Matty was just so close...

And Matty was thinking along the same lines. His eyes were down on Kevin's groin now, following the outline of his cock against the loose swim trunks. Considerably less loose now than they had been a minute ago.

"We should go upstairs," Matty murmured after a few long moments, and by the tone of his voice, Kevin knew he wasn't just suggesting they change into fresh shorts.

Kevin rocked up and onto his feet, grabbing Matty's upper arm to haul him up to his feet. He was a solid weight, but he was scrambling up just as fast as Kevin could yank him up.

And they were kissing again, walking towards the stairs all tangled in each other. Their hands were on each other's chests and hips, cocks hard and pressing into one another through the scarce few layers of

fabric. Their bodies were hot, sweaty and rubbing against one another's, nipples brushing nipples for sharp, unexpected bursts of sensation through Kevin's chest.

Matty sucked on Kevin's neck, just below his ear, until Kevin's knees just about buckled and he grabbed the railing of the staircase hard. "Oh, *fuck*." Matty's stubble scraped his neck, and he almost couldn't think.

Matty chuckled deeply, then slapped Kevin's ass to get him upstairs first. Predictably, he could only wait a step or two before those broad hands were on Kevin's ass, squeezing and kneading.

"Nnh," Kevin moaned his approval, rounding the top of the stairs and slamming his way into the bedroom.

Matty shoved the door shut with Kevin's body, pinning him up against it like he was boarding him.

Luckily, Kevin was expecting it. He grunted as he hit the door, grabbing Matty's hips to haul him in close.

Their lips met roughly at first in quick, hard, open-mouthed kisses. They had to get that out of the way first—the raw desire for skin on skin, wet lips catching and biting, noses rubbing, hands squeezing and pulling until the weight of Matty up against him made it hard to breathe.

With Matty sucking the tip of his tongue, it was really fucking hard to focus on what he wanted to do to him, but Matty had his own ideas. After a couple seconds, he let go of Kevin's shoulder and ran his hand down Kevin's chest, igniting a quick burn everywhere his fingertips trailed. He was halfway down Kevin's stomach when Kevin realized where this was going and moaned a loud, sharp approval.

Matty laughed against Kevin's mouth, then licked his way in again. Kevin nearly lost his footing at the hot, wet tongue against his own, sliding between his lips, and the hand suddenly shoving its way down his trunks and past the clingy mesh netting to wrap around his shaft and jerk it a couple times.

"Nnnh!" Kevin whimpered, jerking his hips forward into that hand.

Matty pulled away from his kisses, leaving him gasping for breath, and sank to his knees.

"Oh, Jesus fucking Christ."

Kevin was going to come in ten seconds flat at this rate. He was

already throbbing with heat as Matty hauled down his shorts, exposing his raging boner to the open air.

Matty smirked, looking him up and down slowly from where he knelt between Kevin's legs. He ran his tongue along his bottom lip. "Been waiting for this view."

Kevin's thighs clenched and trembled as he struggled to think of a smart-ass reply. All he managed was, "You look good there."

Matty winked, that devilish smile back on his face for a second. "Not to kill the moment, but you get tested and shit?"

"Yeah, man," Kevin breathed out. "I'm clean."

"Negative for everything?"

Kevin didn't miss the reproach in Matty's tone, and he winced. "Yeah. Sorry. You?"

As fast as that, Matty was over it and winking at him. "Me, too. You cool if I just..." He wrapped his hand around Kevin's cock again, slowly jerking it and bringing the tip close to his lips.

"Fucking go to town," Kevin growled under his breath, cupping Matty's cheek and pushing his hair back with his thumb.

Matty wrapped those full lips around his cock head, the wet warmth barely sinking in before Matt's lips were sliding down his shaft to the base.

*Ohhhh, yeah*, Kevin thought so loudly he wasn't sure if he'd also moaned it out loud. He gritted his teeth and grunted his pleasure when Matty rubbed a tight fist up and down the base, focusing his sucking on the sensitive head and first couple inches.

It was like Matty already knew exactly what he wanted, and all he had to do was lean back, somehow stay on his feet, and enjoy it.

"Yes," Kevin panted when Matty's tongue tickled at his slit and swiped under the head, then around it. A few licks later, Matty was back to sucking his cheeks in around his shaft and pushing his lips down.

The heat and pressure were goddamn perfect, and Kevin's body was already tightening. Just looking at Matty's hair spilling into his eyes, his stubbly cheeks pulled in around his shaft, the thick lips sliding around reddened, stiff flesh... it all had him on edge. Every time Matty's eyes flickered up his body to meet his eyes, Kevin curled his toes into the floor.

“Yes, Matt—Matty, I’m gonna...” he warned in a breathy pant, but Matty just pushed his head further down, that sensitive spot on his shaft sliding over the back of his tongue, and he was coming...!

Kevin smacked the back of his head against the door as his hips shoved forward in quick, hard thrusts with each clench and shudder of his muscles.

“Yes...! Matty!”

Matty gave one short, sharp moan, and his tongue worked under and around Kevin’s cock as he swallowed, his eyes fixed up on Kevin’s face, like...

Like he couldn’t stop watching Kevin.

Kevin blushed hard, all the blood now rushing from his cock straight to his face. He almost couldn’t look Matty in the eye, but he didn’t want to miss a second of himself sliding over Matty’s lips as Matty knelt back and wiped his mouth.

“Fuckin’ *hot*,” Matty breathed out reverently. It was impossible to miss the tent poking up from his own shorts.

Kevin smirked and grabbed Matty’s shoulder to, once again, haul him to his feet. This time, he pushed him to the bed, ignoring the slight ache in his back from being thrown into the door. When Matty sat on the edge, Kevin dropped to his knees between his legs, already pressing kisses up his inner thighs.

“Oh my God, dude,” Matty breathed out. “Fuck, I’m already really... really hot.”

“You liked sucking me off that much?” Kevin teased, yanking open the strings on the front of his shorts. He pulled them down to Matty’s thighs.

Matty’s cock was finally freed, standing stiffly up in the air and just begging for his attention. Aside from furtive shower glances, Kevin hadn’t had the chance to really see it, let alone in all its glory.

“Tasty,” Kevin teased, leaning in to drag his tongue from the very base to the tip as he wrapped his hand around the throbbing shaft.

Matty’s response was a short, stifled whimper in the back of his throat, and he raised his hand to bite the side of his fist. It was an almost shy look, and it absolutely captivated Kevin.

Kevin loved the salty musk against his tongue. It had been months since he’d tasted a guy, but now that he had his mouth wrapped

around a hot, hard dick, he could suddenly remember why he loved giving head so much. Every little lick of his tongue or extra sucking-in of his cheeks made Matty twitch or tremble, his muscles tense up...

He listened to Matty's breath catching and the quiet grunts spilling from his lips, and the nails digging into his shoulder told him when he was going just fast enough up and down the shaft, Matty's pleasure in the palm of his hand—and in his mouth.

Just before he could really get into the spirit, Matty shoved his shoulder, his breath catching as he mumbled, "I'm gonna—dude, if you don't wanna swallow, now's your chance..."

But fuck, no. Matty tasted amazing, with just a hint of sweaty saltiness, and he wanted to see how *all* of him tasted.

He kept his hand on Matty's stomach when he came so that he didn't grind too hard into his face, but he let him fuck his mouth a little. The way Matty's eyes widened, red staining his cheeks, it had been a while since he'd gotten to do this, too.

"Oh my God, that was... fuckin' fantastic."

Kevin slowly drew his mouth off Matty's cock and leaned back on his heels to swallow, giving him a broad grin. "Mmm, yeah. You taste great." Slightly sweet, slightly salty, kinda pleasant, really.

He didn't expect Matty to blush even harder at that than he had at the sight of Kevin on his knees in the first place. God, Matty was adorable.

When Kevin rose, it was Matty's turn to help haul him back to his feet. "Wanna brush your teeth?" Matty offered, his eyes sparkling.

"Suppose so," Kevin smirked. "Like that won't be suspicious as fuck. Both of us with minty-fresh breath..."

"Well, don't use my toothpaste, then." Matty snorted.

"Stop me." Kevin swiped a taste of Matty's weird ultra-whitening toothpaste before Matty could grab the tube, then put his thumb to his mouth to suck it off. "Ew." It was like being slapped in the face with a whole mint bush. "I'll stick with my own, thanks," he concluded and squeezed some out onto his toothbrush.

Matty was pressed up against his side as he brushed his teeth, trying to muscle him out of the way of the sink, but Kevin stood his ground until it was time to rinse and spit. When Matty was leaning down under the flow of water for one last rinse, Kevin shoved his head down under it for a moment, then laughed and fled to the bedroom.

Matty caught up with him in two seconds flat, his mouth still wet and minty, grabbing Kevin by the back of his swim shorts and hauling him back to kiss him obnoxiously.

Once the initial punishment was over, Kevin took advantage of the moment to press a few more slow kisses against Matty's lips, tangling his hand in the back of Matty's hair. They had to be making out for a good minute before Kevin realized he was losing track of time pressed up against Matty's body, their arms around each other. He laughed as he pulled away, and so did Matty.

"Last one in the lake has to give a freebie." With that, Matty was off like a shot and Kevin was hot on his heels.

Not that Kevin *minded* giving Matty a free blowjob... pretty much anytime, anywhere.

They furiously pounded down the stairs, out to the deck, and down to the dock. Kevin held his breath for the cannonball moment, fighting his way around Matty trying to block his way to the water.

It was hard to say who hit the water first, but everyone was laughing nonetheless.



Matty

“You just got back today? Dude, you both look trashed.”

Matty swapped looks with CJ and scoffed. “Thanks, man,” he laughed at Fleet. “You look like shit yourself.”

Fleet had an excuse, though—he was coming down from a Saturday night hangover with a little hair of the dog this Sunday evening. Matty’s only excuse was packing up and taking the drive back from the cabin, and even that had flown by with such good company.

“You gonna be sober enough for your medical tomorrow?” Matty added, jerking his thumb at Fleet’s pint glass.

Fleet laughed. “I’m taking it easy, man. So, what’s up with bringing Kevin along?”

Matty frowned in confusion and tilted his head. What did Fleet mean? It wasn’t like anyone around here hated him. “Huh?”

“I mean, apparently he’s got someone back in New Brunswick...” Fleet scooted his stool closer to CJ and Matty and leaned in, keeping his voice low. “A guy.”

Matty quirked a brow. For his sake, he really fucking hoped that wasn’t true, but the gist of it could well be.

“He really gay, you think?” Fleet asked them.

CJ shrugged and looked at Matty. “I dunno, man. I didn’t hear him talk about New Brunswick much.”

“Yeah,” Matty shook his head. “I don’t know if he is, but that’s a pretty big rumor to spread.”

“Oh, I’m not trying to be mean,” Fleet instantly assured them, raising his hands.

Matty’s heart clenched with worry nonetheless. “Are people talking about him?” Fleet might not mean ill, but others could. Kevin was big, but he wasn’t an enforcer. Someone could do him a lot of damage—accidentally or on purpose—if word got out. He’d be a liability on the team, and that was the last thing any new guy wanted to be.

“A couple,” Fleet murmured, his voice even lower now. “I’m not spreading the gossip around or anything, but you know.”

“It’s probably bullshit,” CJ dismissed with a wave of his hand. “We go through this every year after the draft. All the rumors, and they’re never true. And nobody ends up caring anyway. I mean, this is Canada.”

He was originally American, even if he had dual citizenship now. He had a couple odd beliefs about Canada—including that it was somehow magically more tolerant of the gays, especially getting all up in their sports.

Yeah, *most* guys knew better than to openly bash the gay hockey player. Didn’t mean some didn’t want to know better. And outside sports, people were often homophobic, too—they were just too polite to say it to their faces. Even closeted, Matty had figured that shit out awfully fast. Probably because he heard a lot of from his buddies who assumed he was straight, but wouldn’t have said half that shit to a gay guy if they’d known.

Matty bit back his sarcastic comment and just took another sip.

Fleet chuckled. “Yeah. But if it’s true, hypothetically...”

Okay, that was enough. Matty set down his glass of Coke a little too sharply. “It’s not good to gossip about shit like that,” he told Fleet. “If it winds up being true, it’d have serious consequences on him. And if it’s not, it would anyway.”

*Don’t be obvious, though. Shit.* The weirdness of talking about Kevin being gay, desperately hoping they didn’t see the personal stake he had in it—both himself, and in his relationship with Kevin...

“Yeah,” CJ chimed in, and even Fleet nodded, which made Matty relax slightly.

“Yeah, I was just wondering. I’m buddies with Jack,” Fleet explained. Jack was one of their bigger guys on the minor league team—almost two-fifty even on his bad days, and built like a brick outhouse. They called him a moose some days, because when he charged someone, he was just as dangerous.

For a moment, Matty was confused. Did he think Kevin was in danger from Jack? Enforcer or not, Matty would fuck him up...

“If it does wind up being true, we’ll protect him,” Fleet added simply and clapped Matty’s arm. “Don’t worry about him.”

That eased the tension a little, and Matty blinked, then sat back. “Oh. Yeah.”

“Don’t worry, man. For Cam’s sake, if nothing else,” CJ added. “He’d come punch us all if we didn’t.”

Matty laughed. “Yeah, he would. Yeah, we’ll keep an eye on him. If the rumors get nasty... doesn’t matter if they’re true or not, the other guys will act like it is.”

“But in *our* locker room, he’ll be all right,” Fleet added firmly. “It hasn’t changed that much since I got called up, I’m positive.”

CJ shook his head. “It definitely hasn’t.”

Deep in his chest, Matty was glowing. His buddies were all right, and so were the other guys.

“Whoever the first guy to come out is—major or minor leagues—in our city, he’s gonna be safe,” Fleet added firmly. It was a hypothetical conversation they had about once or twice a year, but year after year, nobody did. That wasn’t to say nobody *was* gay... They definitely were.

They just didn’t talk about it.

For Kevin’s sake and his own, Matty hoped that Fleet’s faith in their team was well-placed. If they kept going at the rate they already were, he couldn’t see them staying secret forever.

And he didn’t want to be, either.

## Kevin

Rocking onto his back blade, cross over, and around the net.

Then... *go*.

Kevin bolted down the ice towards the net, neck and neck against Fisher. His focus didn't even break when he swerved around the stupid plastic pylons, swaying his way out of them easily and reaching the net in a spray of ice just seconds before Fisher did.

"Good!"

That was all Coach Walker had to say right now, his attention already on the next pair taking off down the ice.

Kevin swooped around and clapped Fisher's arm on the way back to the box, swinging his legs over the side and hanging out there to stay out of the way of the pairs of guys who had yet to go.

Hans was sitting by himself near the end of the bench, his skating partner not even chatting to him.

That was the weird thing—nobody seemed to be talking a lot to Hans today. Even though their main focus today was on training, most of the guys found moments to chat to each other, catch up on how their summer was going, and so on. Nobody was talking much to Hans, and when he talked to them, they only chatted for a moment before turning their attention back to someone or something else.

Kevin felt a little bad for him. Skates digging into the boards underneath, he made his way over to Hans and clapped his shoulder. "How's it going? Ready?"

"Ready," Hans agreed, giving him a quick flash of a smile before he looked at the ice again.

Kevin wasn't sure he was—after all, he hadn't really been training himself. A small part of him hoped Hans realized now why he'd been such a goddamn gym nerd all spring, but he wasn't that mean. He didn't want Hans to do badly, even if he'd been lazy.

Whatever was going on with Hans, it was kinda a weird place to have

drama—the middle of their training camp.

Most of the guys were called out for another round of speed skating... this time, timed.

Fisher was captain this year, and he was handling the responsibility well—he didn't seem like a captain most of the time, except when he had to be. "Over this way," Fisher instructed the guys coming off the ice after their second round. Some were sent to the other ice, and others to the locker room.

When Kevin tried to keep Hans company on his way to the locker room, Fisher reached out to grab his arm and pull him aside for a moment. "We're going again at the end," he told him. "Wait here with me. Go on, Hans."

"Oh, cool. Okay."

The ice slowly thinned on their side as the guys gathered on the other rink instead, starting to practice stick drills.

When their side of the arena was empty except for Coach Walker and one of his assistants who was taking times, the other coaches and trainers having moved over to that ice, Fisher nodded. "Now, let's go."

Kevin stepped back onto the ice and accompanied Fisher to the end, then shook everything out and bent over in preparation for the drill.

It only took a minute at most, including getting ready. It was a good, clean drill—not a hell of a lot of footwork. Not like those goddamn crossover pylons they had to swing their feet around.

Coach Walker nodded his approval when he had what he needed and started heading to the next rink over as Fisher and Kevin stepped off the ice. "Kevin, go get a red jersey."

Kevin nodded sharply. His cheeks stung a little from the cool of the arena air, but he loved it. Finally seeing the difference even a little gym time made over a couple months was incredible. He was faster, more flexible, and a little stronger. Not hugely, but enough that he noticed.

It didn't take a superhero's hearing to hear the voices from the locker room—the most distinctive being a German accent that could only be one guy.

"Maybe he's dating Cam."

Then, there was a quiet ripple of laughter.

Kevin stopped dead in his tracks, his eyebrows rising. He looked behind him, but Fisher had headed to the other ice to join Coach Walker.

He looked back towards the locker room entrance, his hands curling tighter into his gloves.

“You know, he gets a little one-on-one mentoring from his hometown boy...” Hans snickered.

There was no way Hans could be talking about anyone else.

He’d expected this moment years ago. Years of walking into locker rooms expecting to be the next one shoved into a locker, or to hear insults in the showers. Figuring someone would look at him one day and just magically *see* the gay under his skin, start spreading these nasty rumors.

For all those years, he’d planned his confrontation: telling the guy he was being a fucking asshole, that it didn’t matter who he fucked, that that was none of his business anyway since he was too butt-ugly to be worried about him in the showers with him...

But all that was gone now that he was listening to his roommate talk about him behind his back.

Kevin squared his jaw and walked down the hall, rounding the corner into the locker room.

“Oh, hey,” Hans greeted as casually as could be, that usual smile on his face.

Careful as could be to act normal, Kevin returned the smile and clapped his arm on the way by to the locker. “I’m team red.”

Hans was team yellow. It’d be a shame if a practice fight broke out.

*No, don’t think that way.* Kevin couldn’t afford to fuck things up, even if only with a reserve team member. He had to be the bigger man until he figured out what the fuck to do.

Nobody believed those rumors, did they?

A quick glance around at the guys changing practice jerseys as they split into teams told him nothing. Nobody was really paying either him or Hans any mind... or they were embarrassed at getting caught gossiping. At least the chuckles he’d heard seemed too few for the number of guys in here.

Kevin raised a hand in a quick wave and headed out of the locker

room.

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*Can't fuck up a third time.*

That was the refrain in Kevin's head. Today had already given him two big fuck-ups, right in front of Coach Walker's face. Once, he'd turned the wrong way during a drill, almost taking out a line of his fellow players. The second time, he'd almost tripped during crossover drills and Coach Walker had told him off.

Really stupid, rookie shit. The kind of shit that got you laughed at or sent home, and Kevin wasn't sure which was worse.

He had to focus. Hans didn't matter, really. If he was a homophobic dick, whatever... Kevin could confront him on it and move out. His career mattered a hell of a lot more.

Still, it felt like he'd been sucker-punched, and when Coach Walker pulled him aside, it was all Kevin could do not to let his hands shake.

Not everyone made it through prospects camp.

"Kevin? A word."

He wasn't the first guy Coach Walker had talked to over the last couple days. Some of them left the office looking pleased as punch, and others...

Well, his stomach twisted with nervous anticipation as he followed the coach into his office.

Coach Walker gestured for him to shut the door.

"So," the coach said, stretching out his shoulders as he leaned on the desk. "Look, I'll keep it short. Your performance is fine so far. You're a fast learner."

*Oh, thank God.*

That raised an even more uncomfortable possibility, though. Fucking hell, Kevin didn't want to make an *issue* of this.

"Right. Thanks, Coach."

"This is about something else, you probably know what."

Kevin hesitated, then slowly nodded. "Maybe."

"None of us want to know right now if what's being said about you is

true. I normally wouldn't even address it," Coach Walker told him bluntly, and he was looking Kevin dead in the eye.

Kevin resisted the urge to look away, blush, shift from foot to foot like he was *guilty* of something. He wasn't, fuck it, and he wasn't gonna let that prick get to him. "Right."

"But Hans has an awful attitude. He's been saying that shit all day where he thinks I'm not gonna hear about it. I think it's because he's jealous you took his spot on the team."

There was rushing in Kevin's ears, but he did his best to ignore it and shifted his weight from one skate to the other. He'd feel a lot more comfortable if they were on ice right now. He could just pirouette away from this conversation on ice. Kevin had a moment of trying not to laugh before he came to his senses.

"Like I said, it's bullshit drama that I don't want to feed. We're not about that around here," Coach Walker told him, his voice crisp. "I'm only telling you because you're living together, and it seems like a precarious situation. Look out for yourself, ask Fisher if you need help finding another place to live, do what you have to do. But don't make this into drama, kid."

Kevin nodded sharply, tugging his gloves off to press against his thigh. "Yes, coach. Thanks, coach."

Coach Walker didn't look unkind as he watched Kevin for a moment, then nodded. "If you want this job, don't let him have it back."

"Yes, sir."

Kevin's voice was louder now, his eyes steely.

Hans wanted to bide his time all summer, then fight dirty now that push came to shove?

Fine. He could play that game.

When Coach Walker nodded for him to go, Kevin almost stomped back out to the ice, his body burning with adrenaline. He was ready to drill until he couldn't drill anymore.

Matty joined him seconds after he stepped onto the ice, stopping by him in a quick spray of ice, then skating alongside him to the end. He was sometimes busy with major league drills, but other times, they had all the prospects together. That meant Kevin got to see him a lot more than he'd expected.

It was also a bit distracting, but Kevin was learning to cope.



“What happened?” Matty asked. “You still in?”

Kevin nodded slightly and muttered, “It’s no big deal. Hans is spreading a gay rumor about me.” He emphasized the last word slightly. He didn’t want Matty feeling like he was in danger, even though...

Well, he was. Anyone close to him was now.

“The bastard,” Matty whispered, his gaze cutting around the arena in search of him.

“Hey, whoa,” Kevin murmured, tugging his gloves back on and grabbing his stick from the bench while Matty flanked him like a bodyguard about to beat some assholes down. “Nobody was playing along. I think that’s why they’re not really talking to him.”

“I heard something about that,” Matty admitted under his breath. “Just didn’t know it was him.”

“You could look a little less like you’re about to cut a bitch,” Kevin snorted.

Matty hesitated, then chuckled as he shifted his stick in his hands and pushed his helmet back on. “Sorry. Yeah.”

“It’s no big deal,” Kevin told him. He didn’t want Matty going out and getting trouble started. The best way to make a rumor big was to act like it was legitimate, after all. “It’ll blow over as long as I focus on playing well.”

Matty looked dubious but hitched his shoulder in a quick shrug. There were too many guys around to really talk about it, but maybe tonight they could catch each other to talk more about it.

They didn’t have time to chat more right now; the guys were already being split up for another group drill.

Kevin’s muscles burned, but he’d never felt a stronger fire in the pit of his stomach and desire to succeed. He had more than his own neck on the line now. He wanted so badly to prove that Coach Walker’s confidence in him was well-placed.

He wanted to deserve to be by Matty’s side.

Matty

*Shit. They all know.*

Matty drew a deep breath as he skated around the ice idly to warm up, stretching his legs and arms out before the practice game.

Kevin had been trying to play it cool, but he was more tense than he probably realized, and Matty didn't want to tell him he had good reason to be.

That conversation on Sunday night at the bar? That hadn't come from nowhere. Over the weekend, Hans had been gossiping in everyone's ear about Kevin—maybe about Kevin and Matty, even.

Why? That wasn't fully clear yet, but Matty had his suspicions. If Kevin was right about it, Hans just wanted a spot on the team. He was feeling threatened, which was understandable. But now Kevin was living with the guy.

That worried him.

He cast a quick, sharp look across the ice as they assembled into practice teams. Hans wasn't looking right at him, and he hadn't all day. Now he knew why.

"We're playing a quick, clean game. No stunts. Show me your basic skills," Coach Walker was calling out as the guys skated closer to him, assembling for the pre-game talk. "We'll be trying out a few combinations of lines, so stay on your toes. If we need to pause, we'll do it, but we'll try to play straight through and do a breakdown later. If we break, don't wander off. The sooner we finish, the better. Once we're done, stick around and we'll assign you to massages, physio, whatever you need done, or send you home."

There was a murmur of agreement.

"I didn't hear you," Coach Walker told them.

"Yeah!" Matty called out, brandishing his stick in both hands above his head to a ripple of laughter.

"Thanks, Matty. Glad you're on top of your game. Okay, pay attention.

First lines, everyone...”

Matty wasn't surprised to find himself on the first line, along with Fisher. Just like old days. Only difference was a couple of the new guys were joining them. Coach Walker and the others—their manager, the trainers, and so on—were definitely running field tests.

The first couple minutes of play were more about figuring out each other's styles, and everyone played a careful, defensive game rather than making bold moves without knowing who would back them up. That style didn't suit Matty at all. He chafed without knowing who had his back when he went deep.

It was a relief to be yanked a couple minutes later so he could watch the other guys intently and get more a feeling for the ones he didn't already know. He tried to ignore the chatting from other guys who weren't taking this opportunity as seriously as him.

He only had a couple minutes' rest at a time, though, since Coach Walker kept sending him back out in different lines—several times with major league players who might actually be on his line, and other times with minor league players.

Including, most recently, Kevin. Kevin was a joy to play with—sharp and attentive, ballsy, but not as bold as Matty. He was too easily squeezed out, but he could work on that. He was lightning-fast and seemed to read Matty's mind more than once, though. Those were major advantages.

When Coach Walker called Kevin off the ice to swap him, Matty caught the flash of frustration on Kevin's face and hid his smile. Yeah, it sucked, but the newbies had to earn their minutes one play at a time. Kevin hadn't been the top of the draft. Not the bottom, but not the kind of guy who got into the first line first thing.

Just like Matty, he'd have to work his way up, but Matty was certain Kevin had a chance.

As long as that asshole didn't try to bring media attention down on him.

“Hey, don't touch me.”

“You touched me.”

Chris and CJ were mock-shoving each other, chest-bumping and pushing each other up against the boards, pretending to fight.

Then a couple other guys joined in. They were all taking playshots at

each other, but the punches and shoves and elbows were relatively light and a couple of them were laughing. Matty stayed out until Hans skated towards the fight, then approached. Matty got his arm around CJ to try to yank him back out of the fray, but Hans broke between them and took a playshot at his shoulder with a grin.

Matty counted him as a friend before. This wouldn't be out of the ordinary for a couple guys horsing around, but now he wondered.

"Fuck off," he told Hans and shoved him right back.

Hans grabbed Matty's jersey to haul him close, then punched his side a couple times, his hits still light enough to be playful.

Then Matty was almost off-balance, shoved up against the board as Hans rubbed the palm of his glove—a sweaty and gross insult, at best—down his face.

Matty gritted his teeth and took a swing at Hans, not holding back this time, but Hans laughed and sidestepped him nimbly, giving him one more hip check back into the boards. "Missed me." Then Hans shoved him, grabbing his arm and leg to try to pull him off-balance—an even bigger dick move.

*That's it.*

Matty grabbed Hans's helmet strap to keep him in place, then sucker-punched him so fast Hans almost didn't see it coming.

Arms were around him, hands pulling both of them apart, but Matty still saw red. If he hadn't been yanked back, he would have been breaking Hans's face right about now, and from the way Hans worked his mouthguard around as he stared back at him, Hans felt just the same.

But nobody stepped in to back Hans up, and Hans knew it. He was glancing around, his expression deepening into a scowl. He'd lost, and he knew it.

"Hey, hey." That was Fisher, squeezing between them and shoving him roughly towards the bench. "Go sit down for a couple. Take a breather."

"I'm fine." Matty sucked his mouth guard back into place and cracked his neck. "Ready to play."

He didn't want to look over at Kevin. From the bench, Kevin's eyes were boring into him, and Matty had the distinct feeling Kevin was pissed at him for taking matters into his own hands.

Whatever. Hans had always had it coming.

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Matty managed to avoid Kevin until after their massages and physio appointments, but they were both wrapped up with that at the same time.

“Kevin, Matty, you guys wanna do autographs together?” Fisher asked. “Watch out for him, Matty,” he added with a smirk. “There’s a bunch of women that’d like to eat him alive...”

Kevin’s cheeks flushed, which made them both laugh along with a couple of other guys.

“Sure,” Matty laughed. “Come on.”

Just before they approached the arena door, though, Kevin pulled him aside, his smile vanishing. “Dude. Hans is out there right now. You gotta tell me. What the fuck was Hans’s problem?”

“He was itching for a fight, that’s all.” Matty shrugged. “It happens.”

“Even teammates?”

“Dude, fights go from *haha, you loser* to *fuck you and your mom* in ten seconds sometimes. It happens,” Matty repeated firmly, but Kevin’s eyes were still crinkled with worry.

“He knows.”

Matty shook his head slightly. He couldn’t deny it, though—Hans had been watching Matty head off to the gym with him every day, and now he was certain Hans had come to watch them train together.

Eugh. It left him feeling almost slimy, having that gross asshole watching them for signs of more than friendship.

“Fine, but he can’t do shit,” Matty murmured, catching Kevin’s eyes. “He’s just jealous of what you and I have.”

Kevin’s eyes flickered between Matty’s, his brow furrowing with the question. Matty could already read it: *you and I each, or... you-and-I, like both of us?* Then, the answer, as Kevin’s face cleared up. *Ohhh. Both.* And then, a blush.

Fuck, he was adorable. However good he was at a stony expression on the ice, he was so easy to read the rest of the time. Matty tried not to laugh.

“Right,” Kevin said, clapping his hands together and rubbing. He turned for the arena door. “Let’s do this.”

Matty followed Kevin out of the arena, grinning at the burst of cheers as they emerged. He had been expecting a couple dozen people at most, but there had to be fifty or sixty here, and it was the end of a training day. Holy shit, these fans had patience.

“Hey, guys,” Matty greeted. “Weather been all right?”

“Gorgeous out here,” someone answered as Matty approached, holding out a pen for him to sign his autograph. “How’s training?”

“I love it,” Matty answered honestly. He knew his face was lighting up with enthusiasm. “Been here a few times. Kevin here’s new, though.”

“Kevin?” someone called out.

“Yeah, that’s me,” Kevin answered, looking startled.

*Oh, man, Kev. People knowing your name is the least of it.* Matty laughed. “Yeah, he’s doing great too. Loving it. Coach Walker’s great as always. And it’s good to see old buddies again.” He signed his name almost unconsciously now, pleased to notice a few people looking for Kevin’s autograph, too.

Kevin hardly seemed to know what to do, but he got faster after a couple signatures and chatted briefly with a couple fans who asked him what it was like so far.

Soon, they’d all be getting training in how to handle the media, what to say and what not to do, that kind of stuff. For now, this was Kevin’s first exposure to a taste of fame.

Some guys played for a love of the sport, others for a love of money, and for those who fit neither camp, this was the moment that cemented their determination to succeed. Fame was a powerful draw.

Still, Kevin stayed humble. Every time someone asked him to sign an autograph, he looked surprised, then pleased.

They hardly noticed Hans head back inside. Once they’d been out there for fifteen minutes or so, another couple guys came out. There were louder cheers for Fisher, and Matty laughed.

“Hey, man,” Fisher greeted, coming up between them and putting one arm around each of them, then posing for a couple photos as they all grinned. Then he clapped their shoulders. “You guys heading home?”

“Yeah, I’m wiped,” Matty admitted. “Kev?”

“Yeah, me too.” Kevin slapped Fisher’s back lightly. “I think your fans are waiting.” There were people calling Fisher’s name to try to get his attention, after all.

Matty smirked. “Go strut your stuff,” he teased his buddy, who shoved him. “You gonna be home later?”

“Yep,” Fisher promised. “Maybe supper. Kevin, you wanna come over too?” Matty’s chest swelled with gratitude that he hadn’t had to be the one to make that offer in public.

Kevin looked startled for a moment, and Matty tensed slightly. *Come on, man. Don’t go home to Hans.* Then Kevin obviously realized why Fisher had offered and nodded quickly. “Yeah, that’d be great. I’ll catch a ride home with you?”

“Of course,” Matty answered and pulled back from Fisher. “See you in a couple.”

“See you, man.”

They raised their hands to wave again, and then they were stepping back inside, changing and waiting for the cab ride home. Leaving in a taxi was a little safer than trying to get home on the bus after a higher-profile day like this, and Matty hadn’t driven. He probably would tomorrow.

“You don’t mind me coming over?” Kevin asked as they leaned in the side hall, waiting for the text message from the taxi.

Matty shook his head. “Course not.” He tried not to flush with heat. Fuck, his roommates wouldn’t be much longer before they got home, and then Jasmine had to be walked... Besides, he hadn’t been acting out there when he said he was exhausted.

But Kevin was leaning just a couple feet away from him, his bangs in his eyes, those wide eyes so sweet and hopeful as they locked on Matty’s.

Matty jolted with relief when the phone vibrated in his hand, giving them both a distraction. “Oh, taxi’s here.”

They kept a little personal space when they headed through the crowd and found their way to the taxi, then climbed in with another wave each before they pulled off.

Matty leaned forward and gave his address, then closed his eyes to rest them for the quick drive home.

It turned out Kevin was feeling pretty low-key himself. He ambled up

the sidewalk after Matty once the taxi dropped them off outside Matty's house, hands tucked in his hoodie pockets. If only that didn't look so cute, too.

Ugh. Matty really needed to stop thinking of him that way.

In the end, Matty barely remembered the evening—letting Jasmine run around the yard for a while as they all ordered in pizza, watching some shitty movie with their group all half-asleep and aching from head to toe.

“Wanna crash here for the night?” Matty finally offered around a yawn as he stretched, realizing he couldn't keep his eyes open if he tried.

Kevin grimaced. “If you wouldn't mind. I don't wanna face him again yet.”

“Don't,” Matty agreed. “Come on.”

He'd expected more tension when he led Kevin upstairs to his bedroom, but instead, they both quietly stripped off to their boxers and crashed into the bed. Kevin did scoot over to the unused side of the bed, arranging pillows under his head before he breathed out a long sigh.

Matty pushed his face into the pillow and moaned his relief as he started to drift off almost instantly.

“Thanks, man.” The voice was just loud enough to get his attention.

Matty's chest warmed as he turned his cheek and squinted at Kevin through the darkness. Then, he reached out, groping carefully under the sheets until he made contact with a firm shoulder. “Course.” He squeezed it.

Kevin offered him a smile, his eyes fluttering closed as he breathed out slowly.

Matty didn't even remember letting go of Kevin.



## Kevin

Kevin kept his groans as muffled as he could, stretching slowly in bed as he tried to ease the stiffness out of his body. Thank God for the massage yesterday, or it would have felt like he'd been hit by a train.

Instead, it just felt like he'd been hit by a speed skater, which was about right.

He idly ground his morning wood into the mattress underneath, half-wondering if he wanted to be lazy and jerk off here, or wait for the shower...

Then, he caught his breath, his eyes flying open.

Shit, he was at Matty's place, and Matty was sleeping soundly next to him.

That ruled *that* idea out... as hot as it was.

Kevin quietly rolled out of bed and stepped into his old clothes, making his way to the bathroom. Once he found a stack of towels and washcloths, he undressed and took a quick shower.

And, while he was at it, enjoyed the company of his hand. With Kevin's head rolled back and his mouth open to gasp for breath, he just about swallowed a load of shower water when he came to the mental image of fucking Matty into the mattress.

Once the high faded and the shower was clean again, he stepped out to towel off and dress in yesterday's clothes. It wasn't like that was a big deal—he'd only worn them to and from the arena anyway.

Shit. He had to confront Hans after practice today, so he could get into his own damn house again.

Fisher was downstairs moments after him, humming cheerily. "Hey! Good morning. Cereal's in there, milk's in the fridge, or do you want a protein shake? I'm making one."

"A shake would be awesome. Thanks," Kevin nodded.

"No problem." Fisher dumped a bag of frozen spinach and berries into the blender, then some milk. He eyed Kevin over the blender. "How's

camp going for you?"

Kevin blew out a quiet sigh and shrugged. "Um... good? I want to do better, but I'm not sure what to do."

"Asking is half the battle," Fisher half-smiled. "So I was talking to Coach Walker about you, actually."

Kevin's heart lurched as he pulled out a stool to wait for breakfast. "Right?"

"Yeah. You're a damn hard worker. That beats being some natural genius nine times out of ten. The ones who ride on their talent alone without lifting a damn finger to keep in shape all summer..." Fisher rolled his eyes and slammed the "on" button on the blender, then called out over it, "will wind up going home and eating schnitzel all day."

That made Kevin laugh, at least. He let go of a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. "Thanks," he added. "So... I'm good?"

"As you were? Of course." Fisher smiled at him, then waggled his eyebrows. "Pancakes?"

Kevin laughed with surprise as Fisher beamed and flipped the pan towards himself, brandishing it over the stove. "Fuck, yeah."

Thank God these guys had his back. He just had to be sure not to let them down.

## Matty

Hans didn't even look at Matty all day. All day, dozens of guys playing and drilling and horsing around together, and Hans managed to avoid being within ten feet of Matty at any given time.

It was actually kind of impressive, as much as it amused Matty.

The only thing that sobered him up was that Kevin didn't seem to be looking at him much, either. Kevin still chatted with him in the morning as they all split the car ride to the arena, and he wasn't actively *avoiding* him, but he also seemed to have his mind on other things.

Matty tried not to stress about it. After all, the guy was still brand new. Kevin was supposed to be focusing on the prospect camp, getting to know the coaches and making sure his spot on the roster was safe.

But would it kill him to give him one of those slow, sweet smiles now and then?

Matty was on edge with nerves himself, but he threw himself into practice all day, doing everything the coaches asked of him and more. The main coach of his new major league team, Coach Keller, was gonna be a lot fuckin' tougher to impress, Matty figured out quickly.

The drills were even more intense for the half of the guys fighting for a chance on the major league team. From breakouts to transitioning and offensive zone work, moving back into defensive zones, the individual elements of the game seemed to be a lot more important to the staff at this level. There were no more practice games for Matty and the other guys today.

And as opposed to Kevin's level, where the staff seemed to be focusing on teaching skills, there were a lot more business decisions going on every moment on the other side of the glass when Matty and the guys were on the ice.

Matty could see tentative rosters being drawn up as their day progressed. All he could hope was that he was on them by the end of this week. He was working and putting everything he had into it, so if that wasn't good enough, he'd just have to work some more.

“Hey,” Matty greeted when Kevin joined him in the locker room to unlace his skates, his head down. He nudged Kevin’s elbow with his own to get his attention. “How was today?”

Kevin blew out a sigh, those wonderful pink lips pursing as he gave an expressive eye roll. “Can’t tell. I’m just doing what they tell me to.”

*Mmm. That wasn’t what Fisher said.*

Fisher seemed excited to have Kevin on the team—he’d told Matty twice that day that Kevin was impressing everyone with his learning speed and willingness to work his ass off to be as good as everyone else, or better. But he wouldn’t spoil that surprise for Kevin.

Then there was one other conversation he’d had with Fisher that morning that he had to bring up with Kevin.

“You’re fine,” Matty said instead, watching Hans head out of the locker room on his way home. His gaze turned back to Kevin. “Hey, man, we should talk about that.”

Kevin jerked his head in a quick nod, stepping out of his skates and rolling his shoulders. “I need to go home sooner or later.”

“Fisher and I wanna give you a ride home.”

Kevin thought about it for a moment, pulling off his shoulder pads. “Won’t the people waiting outside think it’s weird?”

Matty snorted. “Nah. Hans hasn’t been bringing shit up with them. I searched on Twitter.” No gossip going around like there no doubt would be if Hans had spilled anything.

“Right,” Kevin murmured under his breath, watching a couple other guys play-fighting on the other side of the locker room. “Yeah. If you think it’s not weird.”

“Not at all,” Matty told him. More importantly, he didn’t want Hans putting Kevin out of commission somehow. He grabbed his towel and headed to the shower, not thinking twice about being naked even around Kevin right now. His body was too sore to think about fucking that cute little ass.

Once they had their shit packed up and they were relatively clean, Matty felt a little more human, but he really needed food. He waited until Fisher was done, then headed out with both Fisher and Kevin for another round of autographs before they fled for Matty’s car.

“Does that ever get weird?” Kevin asked. “Does it happen through the season?”

“There’s more of it now than during the season, but yeah, it’s kinda weird sometimes. It’s not like being an actor, but you have this core group of fans who will follow you in the grocery store,” Fisher snorted.

Kevin burst out laughing. “Really?”

“Oh, yeah. You’re a public figure now, man,” Fisher told Kevin with a grin, glancing sideways at Matty.

“It’s true,” Matty agreed. “I’ve run into people in restaurants and malls before who just wanted to talk to me. Sometimes kids. That’s nice,” he admitted. “You see them getting all hero-worship on you, which is cute. I signed up to talk to the kids’ camp...”

“Oh man,” Fisher groaned, buckling up as Matty pulled out of the parking space. “You got suckered into that?”

Matty snorted. In reality, he’d approached Coach Walker about it earlier that week and the coach had instantly agreed to pass his name on to the staff. By the end of the day, they’d told him they’d love to have him. “Yeah, press-ganged in,” he joked. “It’s so hard.”

“What’s involved?” Kevin asked from the backseat.

“Not a lot, unless you’re one of the actual coaching staff. You just go talk to them about the career and what it’s like, give a kind of motivational talk. They like to have a couple actual players from the major and minor teams do it, so the kids can see... you know, the potential.”

Fisher smirked. “And some players from the women’s team for the girls.”

*I really gotta tell at least him someday.* Matty forced a quick laugh and nodded. “It’s a good opportunity. Makes you look PR-savvy, too, if your agent wants that.”

“My agent does want me getting out more,” Kevin admitted.

Fisher looked back at Kevin. “Yeah, you should totally do it, man. I did it before. It’s not *that* bad, like he said.”

“And also tell me where you live,” Matty laughed. “So I can go there.”

“Oh yeah.” Kevin gave him his address, so Matty leaned forward to punch it into his phone. Only a couple blocks away from him, at least. Then, as Fisher and Kevin talked about the kids’ camp, Matty leaned back to focus on driving and plan how he’d break Hans’s face if he was a dick.

As it turned out, Hans barely looked at the three of them when they got home. He mumbled a greeting as he grabbed a pop bottle and pizza box from the dining room table to bring to his room.

Fisher shot Matty a look as Hans's door shut, and Matty shrugged and looked at Kevin.

Kevin just grinned and half-shrugged. "Guess we're cool. Thanks, guys."

"Okay. We'll get home, then," Matty concluded. "Text me tonight and tell me how he is."

"Yeah, man." Kevin smiled, his gaze flicking to Matty's lips and back up to his eyes for a moment.

For a crazy moment, he wished he could have a goodbye kiss, but they couldn't very well smack lips in front of their buddy. They just leaned in for a quick half-hug before Kevin hugged Fisher the same way.

Then he and Fisher were off, heading back home and not saying much to each other.

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When he got the text, it was simple.

*All's fine :) Too busy to worry anyway lol. Thanks for the ride and company.*

Matty breathed out a sigh of relief. He was soaking in the tub, letting a salt bath ease his muscles and keep him tension-free for tomorrow's practice. Walking Jasmine had used up the last few ounces of his energy for the day. He was fine just kicking back in the tub until someone yelled at him to get out of the bathroom.

He wiped off his hands and rested his phone on the edge of the tub as he poked at the screen to text back.

*Great. Glad we could help.*

A moment later, Kevin added something.

*Staying with you was cool. Do that again sometime?*

Matty grinned. Kevin had wished they'd been in more of a mood to fool around, too, hadn't he? They only had the rest of this week, the weekend, and the kids' camp week before they were separated again, each heading back to his own hometown.

*Oh ya man. Sleepover ;)*

*ROFL. I signed up for the kids camp btw. My agent wants to kiss me.*

Matty shifted, wondering if Kevin was trying to make him jealous or hinting at something here. He finally settled on a neutral response.

*:( Hope your agent's cute.*

*Not as cute as you bro,* Kevin told him.

Matty burst out laughing and sent a wink and a quick, *Thanks bro.*

Then his phone rang, and Matty's heart lurched. He half-expected it to be Kevin following up on that flirtation by phone. Fuck, yes, he would have phone sex...

Oh, no. It wasn't Kevin.

He sighed but slid his finger across the screen to answer it, bringing it to his ear and stretching out in the tub again. "Hello?"

"Hey. Is this Matty?"

"It is. Who's this?"

"I'm Henry. Great to talk to you. I wanted a word about the new Fredericton minor league team."

Well, at least he wasn't bullshitting around. Matty leaned forward and pulled the plug on the tub, then bumped his head back against the bathroom wall. "Right... You're the guy who talked to Cam, aren't you?"

"Cameron... Riley?"

"Yeah," Matty confirmed almost aggressively. "You know, the one with the heart problem."

"Right." Henry cleared his throat, sounding slightly sheepish. He had to know Matty was pissed about that. Henry and his buddy, the new team owner, had hounded Cam almost into heart failure from trying so hard to recruit him as their top star. "I wanted to talk to you about where you're going next season."

"This season hasn't even begun yet," Matty snorted. "And you'd have to talk to my agent anyway."

"Well, I wanted a more personal touch. I know you know... some guys from Fredericton—"

"Like Cam."

“—who I’m sure would be delighted to have you around. We’ve got a great team already moving into town. A few more stars would be fantastic.”

Matty rubbed his face. “Right. You still have to get my agent to get back to you, talk to him about the offer.”

“Can I count on your support building this new team, making something great in your buddies’ hometown?”

Matty crinkled his nose. Now he sounded like a phone bank worker. “Yeah, you do what you gotta do. Call my agent and we’ll chat. Have a good one.”

He hung up before Henry could interject again, then rolled his eyes as he pulled himself up from the last couple inches of bathwater. He hated being pressured into making a decision, and one like this? Only an idiot would take a PTO contract or something on the spot, and take an enormous pay cut from what he’d just achieved... unless he didn’t think he could last the year without being cut from the roster.

And Matty had to hope he could make it.

He ignored his phone and toweled himself off, then wrapped the towel around his waist to head back to his bedroom.



Kevin

“Good, Kevin! Come off now.”

Kevin’s legs wanted to give way as he skated around the last obstacle, then over to step off the ice. He wobbled in a way he hadn’t done since he stepped off the ice at age three in his first pair of skates.

“Oh, Jesus,” he laughed under his breath, jerking his chin in a nod to Coach Walker. “Am I good to change?”

“No. You can do better than that. I want you going once more. Watch how Matty does it.”

Kevin could barely remember when the day had begun. Aside from a short lunch break, they’d been put through their paces. He was working harder on the ice than he’d ever worked in his life, and every step of the way, there had been a coach or player development manager or captain or something critiquing him.

Matty was gliding effortlessly across the ice, spinning around each pylon and moving the puck back and forth somehow behind the pylon and around it *without* tripping over either the stick or the puck.

For a second, Kevin kind of hated him, but only because he was jealous. He’d always been told his stick handling abilities were second to none—literally, not as a euphemism, though he wished he’d heard that more too. Now he was watching Matty effortlessly flick the puck between the front and back of his blade, all without tripping over any of the obstacles.

Matty even spun at the end in a quick, sharp stop exactly on the mark, the puck on the tip of his stick and ready to slap into the goal.

Fisher banged the end of his stick against the flooring and a couple other guys joined in, thumping their approval and whooping.

Even Coach Walker smiled. “Perfect,” he approved.

Shit.

Matty wasn’t just good, he was *great*. Kevin was more nervous than ever. Somehow, Matty was hanging around him? Had he gotten too

distracted by Matty and hanging out with him at his cabin and the museum and shit when he should have been training more?

But no guy could stay in the gym 24/7. He had to have a life, too, right?

“Again,” Coach Walker instructed Kevin as Matty slid past him, jumping up and off the ice and punching his arm on the way by.

Kevin offered a weak smile and stepped back down again, taking a deep breath as he skated back into position.

This was it. They were gonna find out that he wasn’t as good as someone had thought he was. And Hans was right there, willing and waiting to take the job. Hell, all it took was one slip—one little distraction—and he’d be back home looking for a new career.

*No. Focus on this. One skate in front of the other.*

Kevin drew a breath, then flicked the puck to the inside of his stick and started moving before he could second-guess himself. He moved on pure instinct, trying to go fast enough that his brain couldn’t kick in. Muscle memory from doing this exercise three times already, and the instinct of what to do with the puck when he had it. They’d trained on every element of this at some point this week... this just required him to put together the pieces.

Around, his stick looping back and forth, eye on the puck, and then it clicked into place.

It was the state of flow that every athlete wanted, and it sank in as quickly as a sun ray burst from behind a thick, heavy cloud. His brain was light and floating, watching what he did but not really offering input. It was all his body, and the trust he put in himself from skate to stick.

Pass, receive. Pass, receive.

And then he was done, the last pylon already past him. Shit, he had to stop—turn around...

Kevin stopped messily, almost losing his balance as he screeched to a sudden halt. His cheeks flushed as he stopped, his chest heaving for breath.

Matty whooped. “Way better! Sorry, Coach.”

Coach Walker shook his head but smiled as he gestured to Kevin. “Come off. Yeah, that was better. Good going, kid.”

Kevin did his best to study the other guys who went, but he was still dizzy with excitement from the moment where drills had connected with other drills. By the time they were sent off for physio, skates off and back in sneakers, most of the guys were worn down but enthusiastic.

All around, Kevin could see guys learning and putting together the pieces just like him. *That* was the point of the camp, not just assessing their skill levels right now—seeing how fast and well they could learn.

“Hey,” Matty greeted as they collapsed in the bleachers to wait for the physio talk and training session on post-game cool-downs. He was sprawling a couple seats away, all his limbs splayed out every which way.

Kevin glanced around as he answered, “Hey.” Nobody else was nearby right now, which made Kevin’s heart sink with relief. “How’s it going?”

“Better now you’re smiling at me.” Matty winked at him, and Kevin felt his heart pick up with a little flutter.

*No... God, I have to focus.* Kevin still turned red and mumbled something like, “Cool.”

Matty laughed. “You all right?”

Kevin shrugged and nodded all at once. “I just... it’s distracting being ‘round you.” He kept his voice down in case anyone else came walking their way.

Matty moved over to the seat next to him, folding himself in more neatly. “Yeah. I know. Me, too.”

“And we still haven’t talked about... all this.” Kevin couldn’t believe he was bringing this up *now*. He had to be exhausted for his filters to be coming down.

“Yeah.” Matty folded his hands in his lap, licking his lips. He looked like he was about to talk to a TV reporter or something.

*He’s nervous?* Kevin smiled a bit. “But we should probably hold off until after the heat’s off. Maybe we can hang out, like, before our speech to the kids next week?”

“This weekend?” Matty asked.

Kevin nodded. “We’ll figure something out after this week’s done.” *Assuming neither of us get sent home early, of course.*

“All right.” Matty hesitated, glancing around carefully and then looking back at Kevin.

Kevin grabbed Matty’s chin in one hand and leaned in for one fast, forceful kiss right against Matty’s lips. After a hot second or two of lips sliding, catching each other’s lips with their teeth, they pulled apart again.

*Holy shit.*

That chemistry was back. It was nearly impossible to resist grabbing Matty and hauling him close again, but Kevin rocked himself up to his feet and let out a quick breath. “Right. Physio. I think I hear them starting.”

When he looked back over his shoulder, Matty was slowly getting to his feet, staring after him with wide, dazed eyes.

*Oh, I’d leave you even more stunned than that if I could.*

“Get your asses over here,” the physiotherapist, Rick, told them as they rounded the corner. “And put your phones away, guys. No distractions.”

No distractions: that was exactly why they had to stay out of each other’s pants until this fucking camp was done. No matter how much Kevin wanted to grab Matty and haul him out back to lose every ounce of strained self-control in each other’s arms.

## Ryan

All week, Ryan had barely heard a peep from Kevin. It wasn't surprising, since this was the week of his first training camp, but Ryan was anxious to hear how it was going.

He figured he'd get a call on the weekend to catch up, but he didn't expect to get a call from Kevin right before midnight on Friday, almost Saturday morning. Half-expecting to hear a drunk and happy buddy, Ryan smiled and picked up.

"Hey, Kev."

"Hey," Kevin answered, but there wasn't background chatter from a bar, and Kevin's voice was rough.

Instantly, Ryan's lips drew into a frown and he turned off the TV. "What's up, man?"

"Well, camp week just ended."

*Oh, God. Don't let him have been sent home.*

"And?" Ryan asked, trying to keep his voice casual and not stress Kevin out more.

"And, uh, looks like I'm still on the roster... pending the actual training camp and stuff, of course. And they're probably gonna give me a couple sheltered minutes here or there of actual game time, slowly build it up."

Ryan exclaimed, "Awesome!"

"Yeah. It's a relief." Still, Kevin didn't sound like he was that relieved. Something else was on his mind. Boy trouble?

Ryan raised a brow. When Kevin didn't say anything, he prompted, "But?"

"Um..." Kevin hedged.

"Dude, you don't call in the middle of the night without a reason." It wasn't that late, but Kevin sounded like he'd just been asleep. "Spill," Ryan told him simply.

"I really, really like this guy. Shit, I just don't know what comes next."

Ryan hummed under his breath. "You hinted at that before. What happened?"

"I..." Kevin trailed off, then cleared his throat. "Someone's trying to gossip about us, and it's complicated, what with hockey and things..."

"It involves hockey? You want me to add Cam to this call? He knows the league better than me."

Kevin sounded relieved. "Yes, please. Three-way call? What is this, the 90s?"

"Wait for it," Ryan laughed. "Uh, hold on... do you know how?"

"No. Do you?"

"No. Hold on," Ryan told Kevin. "I'll Google it."

He pulled up his laptop and Googled *how to 3way call*. After a few button presses, he managed to find the right key combination, then added Cam's phone number.

They both listened quietly to the ringing phone, and then Cam answered, his voice husky. "Hey, what's up Ryan?"

"I got Kevin on the phone."

"No shit. Hey, Kev!" Cam answered, already sounding more awake. "How's it going, man?"

"Great," Kevin answered. "They kept me around. Coach Walker seems to think I'm all right. It's not about hockey, actually. Well, it sort of is..."

Cam hummed, his voice even and calm. "This about dating?"

"How'd you know?"

"Lucky guess." Something shifted in the background and then thumped. "Okay, just had to grab some fresh air," Cam added, and the sound of the patio door sliding shut faintly echoed through the line. "Okay, what's going on?"

Kevin blew out a quick sigh. "Long story short? There's this guy I like, but as far as the league goes... I don't wanna be out. But my roo—*someone* here... is trying to spread rumors and shit."

Cam grunted a sigh. "Fuck that bullshit."

"I know," Ryan muttered, but he otherwise stayed quiet. Cam had the

hockey side covered, which was good since Ryan never knew what to say. He was a lot better at listening than giving advice.

“Yeah,” Kevin murmured. “So I’m pretty sure everyone knows about me now, and I haven’t even formally practiced with the team yet...”

Cam interrupted before Kevin could get panicky. “It’s fine. Dude, I was only half-in the closet the whole time. Everyone knew. The guys are great. If you date a fan or whatever, like I did... as long as he isn’t an asshole like *him*... they’ll look after you.”

“He’s... not a fan.”

Cam sucked in a quick breath and even Ryan muffled his gasp.

Oh, boy. Kevin was dating a hockey player.

“Going right in the deep end, huh? A player?” Cam chuckled quietly. “Tell me it ain’t a coach.”

Kevin sounded sheepish. “Yeah. A player.”

“Who better to understand the life, though?” Cam followed up instantly and Ryan grunted in agreement.

“Or we could both get distracted by each other and fuck up each other’s careers.”

Cam snorted with laughter and Ryan crinkled his eyes, waiting for the punchline. “Dude,” Cam told Kevin. “Are you with him 24/7? You still hitting the gym? Making all your practices?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Calm the shit down then, bro.”

Ryan snorted with laughter, too. “Yeah, he’s kind of right. What exactly’s the problem? He on your team? Can’t focus on the puck when he’s there?”

“No, no, not at all. M—He’s, uh, he’s... on the major league team.”

Cam whistled teasingly, and Ryan could picture Kevin’s cheeks turning beet red. “Friends in high places, then,” he teased. “Seriously, dude. It’s chill. Guys secretly date all the time. We just don’t talk about it.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah,” Cam laughed. “I’ve known a lot of guys I think were fucking, or at least making out heavily.”

Ryan chuckled, then told Kevin, “See? I figured he’d know what he

was talking about.”

“All right, all right,” Kevin laughed, but his voice was a little lighter now. “You don’t think it’ll be a big deal?”

“If it gets to the media and the public, if it blows up,” Cam told him, “you two will have to be ready for that. If you become a *you two*, that is. Just... play really hard. Keep proving you deserve to be there. Cause if it comes out, you’ll have to be twice the player anyone else has to be to get support, and that’s shitty, but...”

“Yeah,” Kevin murmured. “Yeah, I figured.”

Cam was quiet for a few moments, and when he spoke up, his voice was quiet. “You’re lucky to play with him—even if not quite *with* him—though. You’re practicing at the same rinks, you’ll see each other playing at home, in parties... especially during the summer. Make the most of that.”

Ryan wondered how hard it had been on Cam to date someone outside the hockey life. From what he knew, Cam’s ex was a dirtbag anyway. He hoped Kevin had better taste.

“Right,” Kevin said.

“And bring him out here for me to meet, Jesus,” Cam laughed. “This summer, have him come home with you or something.”

“But that’d look—” Kevin started.

“Totally normal, too. Remember what’s normal in the hockey world—bromances are, like, a *thing* all over the league. You can get away with murder, dude. More than outside hockey, really.”

“Huh,” Kevin hummed. “Yeah... I might. Okay. Thanks, guys. I should probably hit the hay.”

“Course,” Ryan spoke up. “I wanna meet the guy too.”

“Right,” Kevin laughed. “Okay. Good night.” After their good nights, Kevin hung up, leaving Ryan wondering if Cam was still there.

“You still there?” Cam asked, just as he was about to.

“Yeah,” Ryan laughed. “Thanks for picking that one up, man.”

Cam chuckled. “No problem, dude. Glad to put my ridiculously specialized skill set to work sometimes. Shit, though... I think I know who he likes.”

“No way,” Ryan chuckled. “Is he... all right?”



“Uh...” Cam said, hedging for a moment, then sighed. “I think so. I’m kinda worried for them both, if it’s who I think it is. But there’s nothing I can do from out here. But yeah, I’d trust that guy with my own brother.”

“I’ll keep working on him if you do,” Ryan promised. “Make sure they come out for a visit.”

“Good,” Cam laughed. “We’ll see ‘em by the end of the summer, then. Okay, I gotta get to bed before Noah comes to find me.”

“Right,” Ryan chuckled quietly, glancing over towards his own dark, empty bedroom. Fuck, he’d been right: he *was* gonna end up the last single one.

“Take care, all right? Still on for a barbecue this weekend?”

“Still on,” Ryan promised. “See you, man.”

“Good night.”

When Ryan pushed through his jealousy, he was glad for Kevin. Hockey would be a damn lonely life and career if he didn’t find someone. He just wondered how long Kevin’s deal with this new guy could stay in the shadows, especially if his roommate was being an asshole.

At least he didn’t have *that* problem. On the other hand, sometimes he’d kill to live with someone just so he had someone to talk to at night.

“Bedtime,” he said out loud. He had some projects to build this weekend, and the table saw didn’t care how much sleep he’d gotten.

Kevin

*Restaurant tonight?*

Kevin hoped Matty was still up for it. It had been a couple painful days without talking much—just a couple words in passing as they rushed about, doing everything that was asked of them. Matty had looked worried and distracted the whole while, or perhaps just focused on training. He didn't know him well enough yet to tell the difference.

He set his phone down on the coffee table as he cleared the empty pop cans, beer bottles, and food wrappers off the coffee table. Before he could carry the bag to the kitchen, his phone went off with a reply from Matty.

Kevin nearly lurched across the table, banging his knees on the edge. He cursed but swiped to see the message.

*Sure! Meet at the bus stop?*

*Okay! 6?*

*Works for me :)*

Matty's emoticon made Kevin grin. He sent a smile back, then pocketed his phone. If there was the possibility of Matty coming back, he wanted the place looking nice.

With Hans always in the wrong fucking place at the wrong fucking time, though... He was out right now, but he might be back tonight, and Kevin didn't want to push his luck. Kevin grimaced, eyeing the trash bag. No way they could come over here, then.

Oh, well. Kevin would keep cleaning anyway. If worst came to worst, it would make moving out faster.

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“Hey, stranger.”

Matty's voice echoed as Kevin rounded the corner to the bus stop. It

wasn't hard to spot him, leaning against the glass and dressed in a forest green shirt that brightened his eyes and set off his brilliant white smile.

"Hi," Kevin answered as he approached him, mirroring that smile. He was still aching a little from the week, but constant massages and physiotherapy had helped stave off the worst of it. "How's it going?" Suddenly, he felt underdressed in his blue checked shirt and black trousers, but Matty's eyes gave an appreciative flick up and down his body.

"Not bad." Matty reached out to push his arm lightly. "Hey, you did awesome at camp."

Kevin brightened up instantly. "Thanks. You think?"

"Oh, yeah. You'll be on first line in a season or two," Matty smiled.

Kevin rolled his eyes and shoved Matty back. "Don't pull my leg."

"I'm not!" As the bus approached, Matty leaned in, his breath ghosting over Kevin's ear as he murmured, "I'll pull something else, though."

Kevin's eyebrows shot up as he watched Matty step onto the bus, then jolted into action to follow him. That was fuckin' bold.

Ooh, it got him hot under the collar, though.

"Where we going?" Matty asked once they found seats.

"Italian?" Kevin suggested. He knew just the place—it was massive and airy, with lots of romantic touches like lamps. Best of all, a disused railcar inside had been turned into seating. He'd made a reservation, hoping to get a table in there.

Matty grinned. "Mm. Sounds good. Are we gonna have a Lady and the Tramp moment?"

Kevin laughed and bumped his knee against Matty's in a light shove. "Shut up." That kinda sounded hot, though... if it weren't for the public thing.

"Ooh, you want to," Matty teased.

Kevin's cheeks heated up and he cleared his throat. "Anyway, how was the rest of your week?"

Something flickered behind Matty's eyes, but he shrugged it off. "Good, I guess. Just work and sleep."

"You sure?" Kevin frowned. "You looked a bit stressed this week. I

mean, if it's just prospects camp..."

"Yeah, that was stressful, too," Matty agreed, hesitating and looking around before he looked back at Kevin. "Uh, had to talk to my agent about my future plans."

Kevin winced. "That sounds fun."

"Yeah. Someone approached and offered... well, a spot on the new Fredericton team."

"No shit," Kevin murmured, his eyebrows shooting up. "Really? Wait, wait, is that... the same one that they were talking about last year? That was talking to Cam?"

"Same guy, even," Matty agreed, rolling his eyes and scoffing. "I told him to fuck off and talk to my agent, but... you know, that's been bouncing round my head. What happens after this season." He was watching Kevin closely, leaving his knee against Kevin's, and Kevin got it: Matty was wondering about *them*, too.

*Yeah. If we start dating, that is a pretty big thing.*

Kevin licked his lips. "Right. You mean with transfers and stuff. I mean, we can be traded pretty much anytime... bought and sold."

"Dance, monkey, dance?" Matty chuckled quietly, but he reached out to brush Kevin's knee quickly. "But we'll talk that over later, you know?"

"Yeah," Kevin quickly agreed. He'd known in the back of his mind since starting to think about doing more with Matty that long-distance periods were a certainty, what with away games and all. But this was a pretty permanent long-distance arrangement.

He could just be traded to Florida or Los Angeles or Vancouver or anywhere next year. Or Matty could be sent off just the same. Did that put an expiration date on their relationship?

Kevin licked his lips. He'd done long-distance—with his boyfriend in St. John's, last year, who hadn't lasted long. A couple flights back and forth and that had been it for them. He'd decided back then not to do it again, but this... This was different.

Matty seemed different.

They got to the restaurant and strolled inside, Matty laughing at his choice of place. "Really?" he asked as Kevin gave his last name.

Kevin glanced at him. "Shut up. I love their garlic butter."

“Guess I better have it, too, then,” Matty winked. “Or it’ll drive me nuts.”

“In a good way?”

Matty mocked, “*In a good way?* Is there a good way?”

“I love garlic!” Kevin protested, drawing back from Matty as he followed their waitress to the table. “You don’t?”

“I can take it or leave it.”

“Wow. This thing is over, man. We can’t be friends,” Kevin snorted. What kind of madman didn’t like garlic butter? Especially from this place? It was legendary.

Matty burst out laughing.

The waitress seated them at an intimate table for two at the end of the boxcar and Kevin beamed at Matty. “Cool, huh? You ever sat in here before?”

“No,” Matty admitted, still laughing quietly. “You really like it, huh?”

Kevin shrugged. “Came out here with my parents when I was a kid to see the Hockey Hall of Fame and watch a couple games and stuff... we came here. Fond memories, all right?”

“Awww,” Matty teased, but he was smiling as he picked up his menu. “Yeah, my family used to come down here in the summers. Go to the amusement park or the expo, sometimes Niagara Falls.”

Kevin chuckled. “We only did once. It’s kind of a long drive from New Brunswick, and my parents didn’t get a lot of time off work.” He fidgeted with the long paper menu, folding and unfolding it. “But I remember that summer really well.”

Matty gave him a soft smile, then looked down at the menu.

Kevin stole a second to watch his eyes flicker back and forth across the paper. Matty’s hair flopped into his eyes, his unshaven stubble contrasting his neat appearance perfectly. He looked exactly unkempt enough to be sexy, not styleless.

Then he looked down at the menu, forcing himself to choose something instead of ogling his buddy.

Once they’d placed their orders, Matty started chatting again. It was so fucking easy to talk to Matty. Despite Kevin’s nerves and worries, just talking to him always made him relax.

Eventually, the topic came back around to the offer.

“So, you think you’re New Brunswick-bound next year?” Kevin asked lightly.

“Nah,” Matty shook his head. “It’d be a pretty big step down for me. I mean, man, I made it here. I should be able to stick around if I make enough of an impression.”

Kevin nodded. He was still a couple years off from that kind of paycheck and glory, but he could almost imagine it.

“And we still have a year to figure that out,” Matty added warmly, offering a quick smile.

Kevin nodded slowly. “In the meantime...”

“Yeah,” Matty breathily laughed. “We should figure *this* out.”

Kevin fidgeted with nerves. “Um. Maybe not in public?”

A flicker of something passed through Matty’s face—disappointment? Frustration? But Matty nodded, offering another quick smile. “Probably good thinking. We haven’t really been subtle up to this point.”

Kevin laughed quietly. “I wanna have more time alone with you. My stupid roommate will probably be around tonight, though.” *Fucking Hans. Ugh.*

“No problem. The other guys are all gone tonight at my place,” Matty told him, his eyes fixed on Kevin’s as he groped for his glass. He bumped into it, almost knocking it over, and blushed as he grabbed it to set it upright, then sipped his water. “Um, if you want to come over, that is.”

“Yeah,” Kevin agreed instantly. “I’d like that.”

By the end of their garlic bread, salad, pasta, and cheesecake, he was just about full and high off life. Matty made him laugh almost constantly. He was always quick-witted, but patient enough to wait for Kevin to think of interesting topics sometimes, too.

Kevin paid before Matty could reach for his wallet, then led him out of the restaurant, waving off Matty’s thanks. “No problem.”

“There’s the bus. If we run we can make it,” Matty laughed.

Somewhere mid-block, Kevin wound up grabbing Matty’s hand to pull him along after him. He dropped Matty’s hand when they got to the

back of the bus lineup just in time, his cheeks hot as he quickly glanced at Matty.

Matty was just grinning back at him, his gaze warm and affectionate.

God, Matty seemed to have no fear in public. Kevin took a breath and let it out, then offered a quick smile back before boarding the bus.

They didn't say anything for the bus ride back, but Kevin was intensely aware of every spot where Matty's knee or thigh bumped his own, and the way Matty's shoulder nestled into his own like Matty wasn't trying to keep to his own space.

When they got off at the usual stop, Matty's arm slid around Kevin's shoulder.

Oh, man, he smelled good. Kevin tried not to sniff at the faint coconut smell he picked up—body wash? Shampoo? It was delicious in combination with whatever light, fresh cologne or aftershave he was wearing. There was no faster way to make him hot than smelling really nice, and crushed up against Matty's hot body, Kevin was already almost uncomfortably warm.

Thank God they were so close to Matty's place.

"That *was* a good meal," Matty admitted with a grin as he steered Kevin down the street at a casual amble.

Kevin slipped his own arm around Matty's waist, curling his fingers around Matty's hipbone through his shirt and jeans and trying not to overthink it. "Yeah. I liked it."

"I liked the company the best, though," Matty admitted quietly, winking at him. "You get really enthusiastic about things."

"So do you," Kevin chuckled, bumping into Matty's side.

Matty shoved him in return, so Kevin pushed him again, then laughed when Matty grabbed him around the waist to try to hoist him over his shoulder.

"Hey, no, you can't just...!" Kevin laughed, trying to dance around the signpost and Matty at the same time. He barely escaped by squeezing past Matty, bolting down the sidewalk and up the path to Matty's front door. Of course, he had to wait to be let in then.

Matty strode after him at his own pace, and when Kevin turned to catch his eyes, he suddenly couldn't breathe.

Matty was stalking up to the door, keys in his hand, perfectly aware

that Kevin had to wait for him. He looked like a predator stalking his next catch. Kevin's whole body flushed with heat, and he slid a hand into his pocket to adjust himself.

Just looking at Matty looking at him like that got him hard. Or maybe that had been the quick grind against Matty's front to escape from the possible headlock.

*Fucking hurry up.*

Matty brushed past him to lean in and unlock the front door, then held the screen door open for Kevin to squeeze past him again. "Après vous."

The little purred "r" rolling off his tongue sent another shiver down Kevin's spine. He kicked off his shoes, glancing around the dark house and looking for a light switch.

Matty pushed into the foyer behind him, his arm sliding around Kevin's waist as he flicked the switches near Kevin's shoulder, then pushed him up against the wall, grinding against his ass for a moment.

Kevin moaned, rolling his head back against Matty's shoulder as he ran his hand over the back of Matty's. Fuck, he *wanted* him.

"Should we head to my room?"

"We better," Kevin agreed with a breathless laugh. "No chance they're coming home?"

"Nope. They're all gone drinking or seeing family and friends and shit," Matty murmured. "And I might have threatened them to stay out on pain of torture."

"What kind?" Kevin breathily laughed, grinding against that hard cock he could feel pushing into him from behind. The hitched breathing in Matty's throat was very satisfying.

"Pranks. I'm the master. They don't dare fuck with me," Matty murmured. His hand slid slowly down Kevin's stomach towards his groin and Kevin's whole body lit up with fiery desire.

When Matty palmed his cock, Kevin gritted his teeth and hissed, his hips bucking forward into the touch. "Yes..."

"Bedroom?"

"Fuck." Kevin wanted to strip off here, but he supposed he could wait another twenty seconds if he *had* to.



Matty hooked a finger through his belt loop and kept him close as they headed up the stairs to the bedrooms, bypassing a couple closed doors for the open one at the end—Matty's room.

"Jesus," Kevin breathed out when he got to the room, turning to kick the door shut behind Matty and grab him by the cheeks for the rough kiss he'd been craving for goddamn *days* now.

"Mmm," Matty murmured with a deep chuckle. His lips moved slowly and sweetly, exploring and tasting Kevin.

And yeah, Kevin tasted that garlic butter.

He pulled back to laugh shortly, his heart hammering in his chest as Matty walked him backwards toward the bed, guiding him each step of the way.

"What?"

"The fucking bread."

"See?" Matty smirked. "But you taste like it, too. We're even."

Kevin ran his hand up Matty's chest, enjoying the smooth ripple of abs and pecs under his hand. Matty was so fucking solid, like a tree. A sex tree. Shit, he wanted to climb him like one. "Fair enough."

He sprawled backwards onto the bed, rolling his head back against the pillow as Matty followed close against his body, blanketing him instantly with his weight.

Oh, God, that was incredible. Kevin's whole body burned with need as he wrapped his arms around Matty's shoulders, rubbing his hand down his spine to the small of his back and arching into him.

And Matty was there, soothing his anxious need by pressing their lips together in quick, hard kisses.

Kevin had been waiting too fucking long to get Matty into bed to let him keep that up for long. He squeezed Matty's ass and kneaded, rubbing his thumbs into that wonderful firmness before smacking it lightly.

Matty broke the kiss to laugh hoarsely, his eyes sparkling with surprise. He mouthed at Kevin's jaw, dragging his lips slowly along the stubble until Kevin involuntarily twitched under him. "So sensitive."

"Shut up," Kevin growled.

Matty shook his head. “Not when I can milk this, dude.” He nipped Kevin’s lower lip, sucking it between his lips slowly and darting his tongue across it.

Kevin was already so raw and on-edge that the slightest teasing—let alone Matty’s hand roaming up under his shirt and fidgeting with his nipple—had him gasping for breath. He *was* sensitive, and Matty was like a kid at Christmas every time he found another of his hot buttons.

“Oooh, you like that,” Matty purred, his face lighting up again in an impossibly cute grin considering the steaminess of the moment. He pinched Kevin’s nipple just hard enough to make Kevin rasp a combination of a gasp and a moan.

“Fucking *hell*, Matty.”

Matty snickered, sitting back on his heels at last to unbutton Kevin’s shirt and shove it off his arms. He followed suit with his own.

God, his chest was a sight to behold up close—solid as a board, all tight muscle. The primal part of Kevin’s brain *loved* it. Drawn to him like a college boy to cheap beer, Kevin couldn’t stop his hands from running up his chest, half in awe.

“You’ll look like this next year,” Matty promised with a grin. “You’re almost there yourself, good-looking.” And then he tweaked Kevin’s nipple again.

Heat flushed through Kevin’s cheeks—more than was already burning through his stomach, making his muscles tense as his cock screamed for attention. “Yeah, yeah,” he muttered. “We can get back to the kissing part. Or one better.”

“I was thinking more than a blowjob tonight—”

Kevin didn’t even let Matty finish the sentence. He grabbed Matty’s thigh and ran his hand up to the bulge, rubbing with the heel of his palm as Matty’s head rolled back and he grunted with pleasure. “Fuck. Yeah. What’s taken us so long?”

“Being worried about shit?” Matty laughed under his breath when he could manage it, running a hand down his face and then cupping Kevin’s cheek to kiss him.

Kevin loved making him lose his mind, if only for a few moments, too. He murmured against Matty’s lips, “Don’t think about that right now. Just fuck me.”

If he thought about fucking his senior teammate—not even teammate,

technically, but a guy *actually* out of his league...

Well, it'd be his turn for him to lose his shit.

"Fuck." Matty's hands were at his zipper, unbuttoning his jeans and sliding them down his hips and thighs at the same time as his underwear. Damn it. He'd chosen his favorite boxer briefs to impress Matty, too.

Kevin's cock sprang free, thick and hard against his stomach as Matty trapped it between their stomachs and ground slowly.

"Yes," Kevin whispered, just about ripping Matty's jeans apart and off. As Matty shifted and squirmed to get his clothes off, Kevin enjoyed that thick cock bobbing in the air above him like a promise.

He couldn't *wait* to take it inside him. All his shower fantasies were coming true.

Then Matty grabbed a condom and lube, and Kevin licked his lips, pressing his feet into the bed. "Hngh."

His chest was tightly-coiled with focused desperation, like they were breaking away down the ice; the goal was in sight and the game rode on this.

Well, not exactly. He'd had colorful fights but never a couple fingers sliding into him during a game, and in bed, there was no other team to face. Just the two of them, utterly focused on performing for each other... or, more than that, on helping each other reach new heights.

"Hnnh," Kevin gasped, breathing out deeply to push past the first few fiery moments.

Jesus, even fingers felt thick after a couple months. His breakup earlier that year had been quick and painless, both of them agreeing that long-distance wasn't their goal... except that he hadn't hooked up since.

Sure, out here there were about a thousand more guys on Grindr and he'd thought about sneaking off to meet a few of them, but he'd always chickened out. It didn't do as much for him as the idea of getting a boyfriend, even if that had been hypothetical until now.

*Don't rush things, cowboy.* He pulled his attention back to the fingers rubbing deep inside him, igniting nerves he'd almost forgotten about. Well, not like he hadn't pounded himself against a variety of silicone things, but there was nothing like another guy with his eyes fixed on his face or watching his cock twitch.

At fucking *last*, Matty pulled his fingers out with a slow smirk.

Kevin closed his eyes for a minute to pull himself together. He was gonna end up confessing his love—

*Fuck*. Where had *that* come from?

“You all right?” Matty murmured, his voice cutting through their harsh breathing.

“Good,” Kevin instantly whispered back, then grinned. *He doesn’t need to know that my heart’s on my sleeve or whatever*. “Great,” he corrected himself, cracking his eyes.

Matty was just swiping his hand down his cock, the sight of the condom unrolling sending instinctive shudders through Kevin’s body.

And then his tip pressed against Kevin’s opening, his brown eyes suddenly gentle and warm. They were almost honey-brown with this light and angle.

Kevin was breathless with pleasure as he jerked his head in a quick nod to the unspoken question, and Matty slid on inside.

“Ohhh, yeah,” Matty groaned as, inch by inch, he slid inside Kevin’s tightness, utterly filling him.

Kevin’s whole body throbbed with tight spasms of pleasure and pain, his hands grabbing for Matty’s shoulder blades. Those first few seconds were worth it for the quick spike in his arousal.

*This* was what he’d jerked off to: Matty’s muscled arm braced by his face, dark eyes intently focused on his face, the nails of his other hand digging into Kevin’s thigh...

And his cock inside Kevin, their breaths almost synchronized as Matty shifted to blanket him again with his weight and dig his knees into the bed.

“Perfect,” Kevin moaned, his hands relaxing now to run up and down Matty’s back, admiring the strong, smooth planes. God, touching him was heaven. His scent, taste, everything all at once was almost sensory overload.

And then Matty shifted, pushing his cock all the way inside and pulling out again at a slow, measured pace.

“Yes,” Kevin gasped, the heat building under his stomach again. Now he was raring to go, curling his toes into the bed and arching into Matty as he tried to thrust his hips into him and help out. “Yes,

Matty...”

“Fuckin’ beautiful,” Matty whispered, mouthing at the corner of his jaw, then his earlobe, making Kevin twitch hard with arousal again. “Just gorgeous... Jesus.”

Kevin laughed breathlessly. “Yeah. You feel... wow.” He gritted his teeth against the words that wanted to spill out. If he started complimenting Matty, he was terrified of how deep those feelings ran.

He just *really* liked the guy. Was turned on by him, even. Every time they were close. Even when they weren’t, when he thought about him. They could deal with the rest later.

Matty was moving faster now, pushing in and out with quick thrusts just perfectly angled to make that spot inside him pulse with pleasure. It felt like the base of Kevin’s cock was being stroked from inside, and his balls were already tightening with how damn good it was.

How *perfect* it felt.

“Fuck me hard, baby,” he breathed out, shuddering again. He needed fast and hard, not slow and sensual.

And Matty obliged, shifting his weight so Kevin’s cock no longer got the friction of their bodies, but he could drive in harder instead. Thrust by thrust, Kevin was coming undone, and he was heaving for breath...

“Yes,” Matty moaned, mouthing and licking at his neck, even nipping the skin near his collarbone, then kissing his chin, and his lips, and... he was gonna...

“Ma—hnngh,” Kevin moaned into the kiss, his eyes flying open with the *force* of what was about to hit him. Matty swallowed his gasp in hard, rough kisses, his hand palming at the tip of Kevin’s cock and jerking up it once, twice, three times—

Kevin was gone, blackness and pleasure and *Matty* all he could think about, rushing through his senses until even the feeling of Matty’s bare skin against his was enough to make him twitch hard. In time, even, with the quick clenches and shudders of his body, the warmth squirting from his cock, the way his fingers tingled and clenched rhythmically around Matty’s hip and shoulder...

At least Matty pulled back from the kiss slightly to let him gasp for breath, but he kept brushing his lips along Kevin’s lightly, thrusting whenever he could. Kevin was squeezing him tight, milking him, clutching him so close he felt like he couldn’t tell where either of them

ended or began.

“Yes...!” Kevin finally whimpered when he could get a breath, and he was rewarded with the most delicious, growling moan.

His world still spinning, his body still quivering in quick, overwhelmed shudders, Kevin opened his eyes just in time to see Matty’s face draw tight. He read his own name on Matty’s lips, but Matty didn’t have breath or capacity to speak, and his nails were digging hard enough into Kevin’s thighs to leave marks.

Fucking *good*. Kevin *wanted* to feel this for days.

When Matty finally settled, thrusting a last few shallow times as his eyelashes fluttered and those dark eyes were looking into his again, Kevin grinned at him, slapping his ass lightly. “Fuckin’ eh.” His own voice was still breathless.

Matty burst out laughing in quick, silent gasps for breath, and he cupped Kevin’s cheek and kissed him hard once again.

This wasn’t a *need to fuck you so bad* kiss like it had been some minutes ago.

It was raw emotion spilling over into the only outlet they had, and Kevin knew because it jolted through his body, too—electric, raw, demanding every spare ounce of attention.

Matty was everything to him right now, in a way that was impossible to describe, and he would have given anything not to have Matty slowly pull out of him, but at least he still had him right here in his arms, and...

Shit. Oh, fucking hell, he was falling too hard, too fast.

When Matty left, or got traded, or grew bored, or... or *whatever* would happen, Kevin wasn’t gonna be able to handle it. People were gonna know. There was no separating personal and professional anymore, no matter what his buddies had told him.

He rolled his head back against the pillow while Matty slowly drew himself up, rubbing his eyes with his arm.

It took him a few seconds to get his limbs in order again, to uncurl his toes and roll his shoulders to get the sleepiness out of his body.

“God,” Matty murmured, as he pulled back and slowly tugged the condom off. “If we wanna do that again, we could always go get tested or whatever.” Then, his lips quirked into a quick smile as he eased himself to his feet enough to toss the condom across the room

into the waste basket. “Not that that wasn’t the best sex I’ve ever had.”

Kevin knew what he meant. “Yeah,” he breathed out, rubbing his arm across his eyes and sitting up. He swung his legs off the edge of the bed, ignoring the burn of pleasure. Scratches and hickies or not, he was gonna feel this for a couple days, he was certain of it. “Damn it, I still have to sort out my trip home.”

That much was true—he had to get his plane ticket, and fuck it, he also needed to go breathe and get out of Matty’s air, or he was going to find himself hooked on it. The idea of sleeping curled up in those arms made him simultaneously panic and want to stay.

“Oh, Jesus. Yeah,” Matty breathed out, reaching out to punch his shoulder lightly as he sat on the edge of the bed. “God, you’ll pay through the nose for tickets now.”

“Yeah, I know. Lucky I’m only going to Fredericton,” Kevin weakly chuckled.

He pushed through the desire to shove Matty back and sit in his lap, instead getting dressed one piece at a time. “You got your—oh yeah, you’re probably driving, huh?”

“Yeah, probably,” Matty murmured.

Kevin paused for a second. That reminded him—he had to ask Matty about coming home with him, but doing it now would sound really boyfriend-y, and...

Nah. He’d ask later.

“You’re gonna stick around for hockey camp first, right?” Matty asked, yawning as he leaned back on the bed.

Kevin nodded. “Oh yeah, of course. Might take a couple days off the gym and just veg out first. Especially since...” His cheeks were hot.

“Oh, baby.” Matty gave him a smirk and pinched his ass before he could jerk away. Kevin laughed and smacked Matty’s hand.

The moment of tension had passed, Matty crashing onto his bed and stretching out on the rumpled sheets while he watched Kevin pull his jeans on. They were back to grinning at each other like buddies.

Who’d just fucked like animals.

“I’ll let myself out,” Kevin told Matty with a smile, hesitating as he fastened his jeans button and smoothed his shirt down. “Don’t strain

yourself.”

“Okay,” Matty laughed, resting his hand behind his head. Which, of course, highlighted his bicep and drew Kevin’s eyes to the dark patch of fur under his arm, the way his pecs stretched and rippled...

*No, I’m leaving.*

“See you,” Kevin waved, giving Matty a moment’s quick smile before he fled the room and the house.

He walked briskly despite the stinging ache that reminded him how damn much he’d come undone at Matty’s hands—how happy he’d been to give in to them.



Matty

It had been two days since Matty's truly epic sex with Kevin, and two days since they'd talked. He'd been able to wave it off on Sunday, but fuck it, it was Monday now and he was pretty sure this was about the point he was supposed to worry.

He'd sent one *thanks for the great date* good night text after Kevin left and just got a smiley face and *you too* in return, so he hadn't pushed it.

*Did Hans get to him? Is he having a gay panic moment?*

Matty debated with himself about showing up at his place to make him talk, but he figured he'd wait until Monday and give him some space to deal with everything. Plus, Kevin might legitimately be sleeping all day after prospects camp. It was brutally taxing on the body, after all.

It was weird being back in the arena without any plans to skate, pulling on his jersey but wearing shoes. There were a lot of better-qualified guys who were coaching them on ice. Their job was just motivation. They were talking to the kids, and some other guys were signing autographs or doing skating exercises with them.

This part was the easiest one, but it was kind of scary to think about what they'd say. They'd been coached in it, pulled aside at the end of prospects camp for their workshop in how to motivate young hockey players, but the words still had to be their own.

"Hey."

That was Kevin's voice, and it was warm and resonant.

Matty was already beaming as he turned around, then raised his eyebrows. Kevin already had his jersey on. The dark blue brought out the light blues in his eyes.

"Hey," Matty answered. "You're looking good."

"You, too." Kevin wasn't acting standoffish at all as he came up next to Matty to half-hug him hello. He had that damn addictive spicy musky smell around him again. Must be his aftershave or something.

Matty ran his hand back through his hair and tried not to remember how delicious Kevin tasted, even after that damn garlic butter. “You got something ready? A speech?”

“Yeah. Do you?”

“Something of one. I figured I’d wing it. I’m usually all right at that,” Matty admitted.

“Cool,” Kevin smiled. “They made it sound pretty informal. And then the Q&A. I wonder what they’ll ask?”

“They’ll be easier on us than reporters, at least,” Matty winked, and Kevin’s answering smile made him grin.

“You boys ready?” That was Bryan, the guy in charge of wrangling the volunteers, dipping his head into the locker room.

“Good to go, sir,” Kevin answered with a playful salute. “Where are we heading?”

“The kids just had lunch. They’re getting excited. You might get swarmed,” Bryan warned with a laugh. “They just got done taking selfies with Walker.”

“Selfies?” Matty laughed. “They got phones?”

“Some do!” Bryan grinned. “You’d be surprised. Okay, this way.” He led them to one of the larger multipurpose rooms.

When they ducked inside, even Matty wasn’t expecting the cheer. They weren’t the most famous players, either of them, but the kids were already genuinely thrilled that they were there.

And Kevin was beaming, instantly at ease as he waved. “Hey, guys! Wow, there’s a lot of you. You all had fun this morning?”

A chorus of eager *yeses* answered the question, and Matty laughed. “Great. What was your favorite bit?”

There were a chorus of answers: skating, drills, and eating.

“Eating?” Matty laughed. “That sounds like me. If you keep going with hockey, be prepared to eat more than you’ve ever eaten,” he winked. “That can be fun, too.”

“So, these two are here to talk to you about hockey life,” Bryan spoke up from behind them. “You wanna introduce yourselves?”

“Sure.” Kevin spoke up before Matty could, already smiling ear to ear. He was so fucking *adorable*. *Jesus Christ*. “I’m Kevin Shaw. I played in

New Brunswick last year, and I just got signed for a year to, well..." He gestured at his jersey and laughed. "Which is so, so cool. I'm really looking forward to that! But I think they wanted me there because... well, I'm so handsome," he struck a pose for a second which made the kids laugh and Matty's heart melt into a giant puddle in his chest. "And," he winked, "because I have some pretty recent experience with the lower levels of hockey—AKA, where you guys will start out. Right?"

"Right," a couple kids answered. They were falling for him hook, line, and sinker.

Matty was smiling like an idiot himself, trying not to watch Kevin too much. "And I'm Matty O'Brien. I played for them," he gestured at Kevin's jersey, "before, but I just got called up to the *big boys'* team now," he laughed. "So, yeah. I totally don't sleep with this jersey under my pillow."

The kids laughed for him, too. At least they indulged him with that. Phew.

Matty did pretty damn good, he thought, of winging his speech.

He talked about how hockey could be really hard, but working hard at it was the most important part. After a quick chat about the kinds of things involved in pro hockey training, from gym workouts to nutrition, he explained what he'd always thought about talent. It was cheesy but true—hard work beat talent when talent didn't work hard.

That was when Kevin joined in. "Yeah, I'm the perfect example of that. I'm not really special," he told the kids. "But I got in because I've worked my butt off for years at this, you know? I focused on this all through middle school, high school, university... and eventually they got tired of me and agreed to let me play," he grinned as the kids laughed again.

"And that's the other thing," Kevin added. "It's a career, you know? But it isn't easy. So, you can't just focus on hockey being the only thing in your life. Make sure you study hard in school and come up with a backup plan. Maybe you don't mind teaching, or science, or being a nurse, or... whatever. There's tons and tons of awesome things to do. You gotta make sure you're not locking yourself in."

"And focus on your friends and family, too," Matty smiled. God, they were all watching so intently. There was a blond kid near the front who looked like he was about to start taking notes.

"That's right," Kevin agreed. "And eventually, boyfriends or

girlfriends,” he grinned at them.

That got another laugh, along with some giggling and “ew”s from the kids.

“I know, I know. But the people around you will be working hard to help you succeed, too, so... you know, be great to them,” Kevin smiled. “And make sure they’re great for you. Make hockey not the *only* thing you eat, sleep, and breathe. Make it part of a big, exciting life. There’s a thousand other things you can do along with hockey. Don’t miss out on that.”

A chill ran down Matty’s spine at the simple, yet expressive words.

Part of a big, exciting life.

Shit, Kevin was a natural-born leader... maybe captain material. He’d never seen him like this—never had the chance to yet—but it made Matty fall in love with him just that little bit more. Plus, Kevin was totally being dad material right now.

*Fuck’s sakes. Too. Soon.*

The kids were starting to ask questions, so Matty focused on them again. He had hours and hours to think about Kevin, but only an hour with these kids. They deserved his full attention, or as much of it as he could spare when Kevin wasn’t flashing that huge, eager smile.

## Kevin

Somehow, in talking to Bryan about the kids' hockey camp and meeting a couple of the guys in the hallway who were on their way to help coach, Kevin got separated from Matty after they were done talking to the kids.

He did spot Matty hesitating by the locker room door for a minute, but he couldn't extricate himself from the conversation about practice schedules without being rude. And then Matty got shy, or nervous, or something, and ducked out before Kevin could catch him.

It was on his mind for a little while on the way home, and he kept fidgeting with his phone. Should he call him up? Hang out tonight, now that their big commitment was done? But they were each about to head home again, taking advantage of these last few intermittent weeks before the 24/7 hockey life began.

Was now the best time to talk to Matty?

The thought of what he had to do first distracted him from that question.

He couldn't keep living in fear that Matty would show up at his place at the same time Hans was home.

In fact, it was great timing that he ran into Hans hanging out with a couple other guys outside the arena.

And *excellent* timing that Hans was just saying, "...course Kevin signed up to volunteer with Matty."

"Why's that?" Kevin asked casually, letting the steel arena side door slam shut behind him as he tucked his hands in his jeans pockets, approaching the group.

He noted the other guys awkwardly shifting and chuckling, but he didn't give a fuck who they were or why they were talking to Hans. His gaze was locked on his roommate.

Hans shifted and licked his lips, his eyes cutting to the side door and then back to Kevin. "Nothing."

“No, I wanna know. You’ve been talking a lot about me lately, I heard.” Kevin forced himself to keep his voice friendly. This wasn’t gonna become a brawl in the parking lot, by any means. He just had to talk things through.

Hans straightened up, pushing himself away from the side of the building. “You know, just seems like you guys are... pretty tight.”

“Yeah?” Kevin asked. “Why’s that?”

“Always meeting up, making sure you leave separately... working out together... you know.”

“And that’s different from Fisher and CJ how?” Kevin asked. “Or any one of... shit, how many dozens of guys are buddies around here?”

“Right, right,” Hans answered, but his voice was not in the slightest convinced.

Kevin paused for long moments, his eyes flickering between Hans’s. Hans looked guilty when he scrutinized him, but he stood his ground. Kevin jerked his chin up slightly, keeping his voice down. “I don’t care if you think or say I’m gay to anyone and everyone. It’s not something to be ashamed about, and it’s really none of your business anyway. Just don’t sabotage my fuckin’ career and we’re good.”

He held Hans’s gaze for half a second, then turned on his heel and strode off for the bus stop.

What he didn’t expect was the crunch of footsteps behind him. A wild part of him, born and bred in a place where guys had fucked him up for even admitting he *could* be gay, tensed up and planned where to grab Hans’s arm and throw him to the concrete, but Hans didn’t touch him. He just caught up beside him.

“I’m sorry.”

That made Kevin stop in his tracks. He examined Hans’s face for a second or two, his brows drawing together. That was an awfully fast apology.

“Yeah?” he responded carefully, turning again to walk towards the bus stop. He walked slower this time, making it clear Hans could follow.

And follow Hans did, keeping him company towards the bus. “Yeah. I, uh... I got... wrapped up in losing my spot. Maybe forever.”

There was no mistaking the raw emotion in his voice, even if Hans tried to flatten it out and sound casual.

Kevin believed him now. He nodded slightly, scuffing down the street toward the shelter. "That's gotta suck. But man, I offered to train with you. I could've—*can*—help."

He wasn't sure he'd trust Hans again soon, but he had to live with the guy for now.

Hans hesitated, then shook his head. "No, you don't need to do that."

"Either way, *you* do. That's the difference right now," Kevin told him. No better time than the present for brutal honesty. "You have to work harder, or you *are* gonna lose that spot forever."

Hans's eyes steeled for a second, and it seemed almost like he might shove Kevin, but he held back. "What?"

"I just told the kids, I'm not that talented," Kevin laughed. "I'm not some wonder kid. Jesus, I just got my bachelors degree."

Hans conceded that with a slight smile and nod.

"I just work really fuckin' hard at what I do. So a little tough love: work harder, and work more. Then it'll be a fair fight for my position, right?"

They were at the bus stop, and Hans was slowly settling down again, his shoulders sinking. "Yeah. Uh, you... you gonna stay living with me after...?"

"Depends," Kevin told him, keeping his voice calm. As much as he wanted to punch Hans for being a dick, that wouldn't solve much. "You gonna be a dick every time I have a buddy over? Or, if it came to it, a boyfriend?"

Hans flinched and winced, but he looked down the street for a second, sucking on his teeth. Then he looked back at Kevin and shook his head. "I'll mind my own business. Uh, you might wanna know this." It was almost painful for him to speak, so Kevin waited it out. "The other guys told me straight-up... it'd be awesome if you *were* gay."

Kevin quirked his brow.

"They all want to support whoever the first guy to come out is." Hans cracked a small smile, and Kevin knew the look of a man trying his damndest to accept defeat gracefully.

Kevin smiled back, then nodded. "Here's the bus. You coming home?"

"Nah. I think I'm gonna walk around a bit," Hans admitted. "Clear my head."

Kevin hesitated as the bus pulled to a stop by them, then offered his hand. When Hans took it, they shook. It was a tentative trust between them, and Hans still looked like he was worried the gay would rub off on him, but it was better now.

“See you later.”

“See ya.” Hans turned to walk down the street, hands in his pockets.

Just as well, because Kevin wasn’t heading home.

---

Walking up to Hans had been a piece of cake. He hadn’t even had to make his message sink home with knuckles or threats.

Approaching Matty’s door? Jesus, that was like slogging through molasses.

Kevin felt a little shitty for ignoring Matty yesterday and today, for not once bringing up the fact that he *was* really happy with the way the date had gone and that he wanted more like that.

It hadn’t taken long—just long enough to book his flight and arrange for a ride from the airport—before he’d regretted leaving Matty’s house. Especially before he told Matty what was really on his mind.

Whatever Matty wanted to be, he wanted from him. Thing was, he was gonna have to ask for it. They couldn’t keep making out, hooking up, and fucking fleeing. No, *he* couldn’t keep doing that. It wasn’t Matty running away every time, after all.

He sucked on his lower lip for a second, then let out a slow, shaky breath and walked up the porch steps.

It wasn’t like he couldn’t just greet Matty as a buddy, walk in and hang out with him, but... Matty deserved better than that. Matty was just waiting for him to man up, and he was here to do that.

A few moments after he rang the bell, he heard voices inside and his stomach jolted with nerves.

Then, Matty was beaming at him, pushing open the screen door for him. “Hey, man. I was gonna wait but you looked pretty caught up.”

Kevin jerked his head in a nod and stepped into the foyer.

A glance at the living room beyond showed him CJ, Chris, and Fisher. The usual guys, then. The ones Matty kept telling him he didn’t care if



they found out.

Thank God.

“Yeah, no problem. Uh, before anything, I just gotta... You wanna come home with me? Visit Cam and hang out with me properly—no, I mean, *date* me properly, away from the gym and Hans and all this bullshit, and...”

He was positive his cheeks were tomato-red, but the words spilled from his lips, not at all in the suave order he’d imagined them into on the bus. “I mean, as, not just buddies,” he desperately started to clarify. “Like, boyfriends? Do you do boyfriends? I do boyfriends, but I never asked—”

Shit, was he supposed to do this in front of his friends? Should he have texted? He definitely should have texted.

Matty was grinning, pulling him in by the waist in one hard, fast jerk.

Kevin stumbled into Matty’s body, barely getting his arms around Matty’s shoulders as Matty kissed him hard.

Oh, God, it was like coming home into Matty’s arms. He hadn’t realized until this second how much he’d missed those full lips, those warm eyes, the strong hands on him...

Especially the warm lips that slid along his own for a second or two as Matty tilted his head so they could kiss deeper and Kevin’s hands finally settled on Matty’s waist, curling in to grip and claim him every bit as much as Matty was staking his own claim.

Even a couple days of avoiding Matty had him feeling like he’d never breathed air before when he pulled back.

And then he realized there was a mix of groans, whoops, and laughter from the living room.

Kevin wanted to melt through the floor instead of look at them, but Matty was grinning broadly at him.

“I’ve never been wooed so hard in my life,” Matty teased, dark eyes sparkling with mischief. “What a romantic.”

Kevin covered his face with both hands now, letting go of Matty. “Shit.”

They were all laughing now, even him.

When he managed to drag his hands down his face, Matty’s hand

curled around his wrist to help pull his hands down, then slipped into his own as Matty pulled him into the living room.

“Fredericton. What a romantic invitation.” CJ was grinning from the armchair, his feet on the coffee table.

“Fuck Paris,” Fisher agreed. “Someone take me to Fredericton.”

“I would if you spoke any French,” CJ shook his head.

“Damn it. I missed my chance,” Fisher dramatically groaned.

Kevin realized he hadn’t really been breathing, still too wound-up to make any eye contact, but as he gradually relaxed, he started to laugh along with them again.

They were being teased, but it was friendly. Just like his buddies back home would have done—making fun of him, but not because they wanted him to feel that guilty squirm like he was doing something wrong.

No—because they wanted him to look embarrassed.

“Fuck off,” Kevin laughed, which started another round of laughter.

Matty pulled Kevin over to the couch. “Guess we better book me a ticket. What flight are you on?”

Kevin rubbed his face before he pulled out his phone, his head still spinning at how fast everything had happened.

All he’d had to do all this time was ask. Maybe not like a backcountry bumpkin who’d never been kissed, but he could live that down.

Maybe, eventually.

He had the feeling these guys wouldn’t let that happen for a while, but that was surprisingly okay with him.

## Matty

If only Matty didn't have the shittiest timing in the world, he'd feel like the luckiest guy in the world.

As it was, he'd been stuck in his goddamn tiny hometown for a week now, and the itch under his skin to get out of his fucking hometown had just hit critical at a dinner conversation about why he wasn't dating some hot Toronto chick. The whole time, he'd been thinking about how soft Kevin's skin was.

Sometimes thinking about how damn gay he was made Matty laugh; other times, it twisted the knot in his chest until he itched to break and blurt it out over supper.

When he and Kevin had agreed to be boyfriends, they hadn't really had the chance to discuss *this* yet. He knew Kevin planned to tell his buddies and family about him sometime, because there was no way they could hide this when he was going out to Fredericton to visit everyone with him, but...

His own family was different.

He rubbed a hand down his face as he packed up his bag. He loved his parents, most of the time, but a week at a time was about all he could stand.

It was a damn good thing he had to fly out of Toronto tomorrow, and he had a good excuse: seeing some old *and* new buddies in the same place.

His family understood. After all, they could get him wanting to be close to his hockey buddies. Matty just wasn't sure they'd understand if he was also boning one of them.

He thought he'd done pretty damn well explaining away his daily Skype calls to Kevin, distracting himself reading breakdowns of the upcoming season and how good (or bad, according to some commentators) his chances were, and going for long walks with Jasmine.

Sometimes all-day walks, but hey, whatever worked.

But he wasn't about to whine about it. His family *probably* wouldn't hate him. They'd just... do that subtle thing, which was worse.

He loaded his pack in the car, hugged his parents goodbye, got Jasmine settled in the passenger seat, and got the fuck out of Dodge.

Passing city limits was the second-best part of his day.

The best? Pulling over to read a text—not from Kevin, which would normally be the highlight of his day, but from Chris.

*Nate texted. He hasn't been around cause he has a girlfriend now. He's moving out. Know anyone who needs a new roommate? ;)*

When the meaning sank in, Matty gasped so sharply Jasmine whined and looked over at him. He almost flung his phone at the dashboard in excitement.

“Okay, girl,” he told her. “I hope you're ready to fly to a tiny little place that's a little less shitty than that place was. And then ask my boyfriend if he'll move in, before we've even twice—wait, I don't need to tell *you* that. That's not appropriate for doggy ears.”

Jasmine eagerly wagged her tail, trying to squirm over to get her nose into his lap.

He laughed and pushed her back gently, scratching her ears there instead. “No trying to drive. You need a walk before we finish the drive? Let's go.”

Tomorrow's trip was a lot more exciting than this one had been. He'd be with Kevin 24/7 for this week in Cam's guest room, where Kevin was staying to spread around the burden of hosting him each time he visited.

By the time he got back to the car, Matty was calm enough to text back.

*Thanks man. I'll ask him when I see him :)*

Finally, just tomorrow, they could be alone together. Well, not quite alone, but away from anyone who would judge them.

---

Kevin wasn't surprised to get a call from Cam that evening while he was trying to figure out what to pack to impress Matty and also be comfortable that week.

“Hey, man.”

“Dude, you’re flying in tomorrow!” was Cam’s excitable greeting.

Matty laughed. “Yeah, I know I am.”

“Bro. It’s been too long.”

“Broooo,” Matty snickered, grabbing another Henley t-shirt to shove into the bag. “Yeah, it’s been way too long. We just never made it out, huh?”

“Good of you to come back and see me.” Cam’s voice was light, almost teasing, and Matty hesitated for half a second. But he couldn’t come out to Cam without asking Kevin’s permission first, could he?

“Yeah. You were my best bud out here for ages.”

“Kevin’s really glad to have you around.” Cam was speaking more seriously now, but then he chuckled. “And he’s cool to hang around, huh?”

“Yeah, he’s awesome,” Matty agreed lightheartedly. “Thanks for letting me crash, especially with Jazz.”

“No problem! Noah’s been bugging me for months now to get a dog, anyway,” Cam laughed. “He loves having ‘em around.”

“Awesome,” Matty laughed.

“Kevin likes ‘em, too, doesn’t he?”

Matty blushed as he shoved another pair of jeans into his bag. If he didn’t know better, he’d swear Cam already knew. “Yeah, he’s great with her.” He rifled through the hangers, choosing a couple more things.

“Good,” Cam approved. He paused for a few seconds, then laughed. “You only packing now?”

“I just got back from home,” Matty complained, rolling his eyes. “Shut up.”

“Ah, right, yeah,” Cam answered. “How was that?”

Matty grunted. “Not the best visit, but it was just long enough.”

“Yeah,” Cam murmured. “Folks got you drove?”

Matty blew a quick sigh out through pursed lips. “Just about drove nuts, yeah. All the *why aren’t you dating some Toronto girl yet—*”

Shit. Wait.

Cam was gay, and he was gay, but they hadn't actually *talked* about it. Hell, Matty hadn't even known for certain Cam *was* gay, except that weird thing with his shitty ex who'd dumped him in the ambulance on the way to hospital. Well, and then he'd gotten a boyfriend within days of getting back home, which Matty had endlessly teased him about.

"They really leaning on you? Shit," Cam groaned. "That sucks. Don't worry, man. We're cooler out here."

"Yeah, good," Matty laughed. "Okay, I gotta finish packing and get Jasmine's food ready."

"Okay!" Cam brightly added. "See you tomorrow, man."

Matty had only just put his phone down when it buzzed with a text—from Cam, no less. That was kinda weird.

He picked it up, then squinted. It was a screenshot of a phone conversation, but only a picture text and its original sender—Fisher—was visible.

The photo was Matty himself with his arm around Kevin's shoulder, and Matty was looking goddamn starstruck or some shit as he watched Kevin.

It took him a second to place it. That had been when they were booking these plane tickets, right after Kevin's incredibly adorable flustered proposal on the doorstep.

Matty's cheeks flushed with heat as he slapped his phone against his forehead. Cam had been playing with him after all.

He rolled his eyes, even though he was laughing. Goddamn his buddies. "Fuck you, Fisher!" he called out, knowing Fisher would hear from the kitchen.

He heard a burst of laughter in return. "Yeah, you wish!"

Matty groaned and sent a quick, *Fucking Fisher* back to Cam, but he was still laughing as he zipped up his bag.

Kevin

“You look like you’re about to twitch out of your skin,” Cam laughed at Kevin. “Relax, man.”

Kevin was staring out the airport window past the luggage belt. He knew they had to stick around until the guys unloaded Matty’s dog, too, but he was so eager to at least see him.

It was gonna be a full car load with him, Cam, Floyd, Matty, and then Matty’s dog, but Cam was driving and Floyd had insisted on coming along to see him. It was fair enough, since Floyd was probably Kevin’s other closest friend. Well, there was Ryan, too, but Ryan was on a building site for another twenty minutes. Floyd had wanted the news from the horse’s mouth.

Even if it was a little late for that.

Kevin had turned about five shades of red, according to Cam, when Cam showed him the photo text from Fisher. It wasn’t like he could keep it a secret after that, and he *had* laughed at Cam teasing Matty on the phone last night about it.

God, a week apart from him was stifling. This season was gonna be brutal, but Kevin had managed to put all that out of his mind for now.

The stairs had just been rolled up to the plane, and people were starting to leave.

Oh, God, it was impossible to miss Matty’s rolling walk as he trotted down the stairs, then stopped to ask a ramp worker something, jerking his thumb toward the plane. Then he beamed and nodded, raising a hand in a quick salute before turning to the terminal building.

Kevin headed right up past the luggage belt to the entry doors, tuning out Cam and Floyd entirely as he watched Matty approach. At the last second, just before he walked through the door, Matty noticed him, too.

The way his face lit up, his face splitting in a grin, his body jolting to attention as he stood straighter...

Kevin didn’t give a fuck who else was around and watching them; he

grabbed Matty and kissed him the moment he walked through the door, and Matty's strong arms were hugging him close to him at the same moment.

He made himself pull back after a couple seconds, fully aware that it was hard to kiss while grinning so much. "Hey."

"Hey," Matty answered, sounding breathless. He kept his hand on Kevin's arm, which made Kevin tingle with pleasure. "That was some *hello* there."

"Hope you don't mind if we don't say hi like that," Floyd cracked a joke from behind them.

Matty and Kevin both laughed, and Kevin kept hold of Matty's hand as they turned. Matty leaned in for half-hugs with both Floyd and Cam.

"Thanks for picking me up. Jesus, I got a whole welcoming committee."

"Couldn't leave 'em behind," Kevin rolled his eyes. "Everyone else is back at Cam's place starting up the barbecue."

"Awesome!" Matty exclaimed. "Should've come to visit months ago."

"Yeah, asshole," Cam exclaimed, punching his arm as they wandered to the baggage carousel. "And yet Kevin shows up and suddenly you're flying here, *with* your dog..."

Matty's face crinkled sheepishly as he laughed. "Hey, you didn't come out and see us, either."

"Fair, I guess," Cam snorted. "Still."

Then, Matty grabbed Kevin's arm with his spare hand, his eyes alight with some kind of news. His words were spilling out of him almost faster than his lips could move. And given what Kevin knew about his lips' capabilities, that was pretty impressive.

"Dude. Dude, my other roommate, the one you never met 'cause he's never home, Nate? He's moving out. So Chris texted and, like, I dunno, you were saying yesterday Hans has gotten better, but if you wanted to move in, bro, you could totally, like, move in."

This must have been what Kevin looked like a week or so ago. He couldn't stop himself laughing first, then shaking his head quickly when Matty started to look dismayed. "I'm not laughing at the idea, I'm—man, I'm rubbing off on you."

"Gross, we don't need to hear that kind of talk," Floyd teased.



“Shut up, Mr. *I’m just gonna be with my boyfriend 24/7 now,*” Kevin laughed, and Matty laughed, too.

Then, Kevin could turn his attention back to Matty.

“That’s so romantic,” Kevin teased, but there was no denying it. Hans *had* gotten better over the last week, but living with him? For a year? He wasn’t Hans’s fucking enlightenment project.

And yeah, it was slightly weird to move in with the guy he’d just started dating, but there was no way he could turn down that opportunity. Chris, CJ, and Fisher seemed like the best roommates, and he’d have his own room anyway. Though, he suspected he wouldn’t be spending a lot of time in it.

“Yeah,” Kevin nodded after a second of thought. “I’d like that.”

Matty beamed. “It’s settled. I’ll get Chris to text you all the lease and bill stuff.”

“Awesome,” Kevin smiled.

“I think they moved faster than any of us,” Cam marveled from behind them.

Kevin turned red. Yeah, it *did* come off as a bit fast, but...

“Okay, Jasmine’s supposed to be ready now over there, so I’ll just go pick her up and be back for the luggage—”

Matty strode off, almost turning the wrong way before he found the right way and strode off about as fast as his legs would carry him. He was still beet-red.

Kevin couldn’t stop laughing under his breath as he waited by the baggage carousel. Matty was on fire with energy. He looked like he would walk clear to town if they let him.

To be fair, Kevin felt the exact same.

Their only interruption was on the way out of the airport, after Matty had Jasmine’s kennel loaded onto a trolley and his suitcase on top of it, and a couple guys stopped them.

“Hey, are you... Matty...?”

“Yeah,” Matty answered, eyes flickering between them both before he smiled. “Hockey fan?”

“Shit, it is you. Sorry, I thought we were just gonna freak out some stranger,” one of the guys laughed, shaking hands. “Do you mind if we

get a photo?"

Matty was turning pink as the rest of them grinned, but he shrugged. "Yeah, of course."

Kevin smirked. "Want me to take a photo?"

The guys were watching him, looking at each other like they weren't quite sure.

"This is Kevin. He's only just got drafted. And that's Cam Riley, of course."

The guys both looked young, university-aged. One of them was being pretty cool and looking embarrassed, but the other guy's eyes widened. "Oh, that's—wow, I thought so, but I didn't wanna, like... assume. That's awesome. Man, could I get a photo?"

Cam laughed and grabbed Kevin to steer him into the shot. They all grinned for the camera.

They had a couple minutes' conversation about the Toronto teams' chances this year before the embarrassed-looking guy tried to steer his friend off.

But the other guy was determined to get in a word. "So, uh, that article... I guess it's true?"

Kevin's stomach sank. "What article?"

"The one... *oh*, you might have been on the plane."

"It's nothing," the other guy tried to say, but Matty shook his head.

"No, I wanna know." Matty slid out his phone and Kevin did the same, turning off airplane mode.

"Um, some journalist in Toronto... dug up a couple things... a photo, and stuff..."

*Oh, shit.* Kevin swapped a quick look with Matty, then looked back at their fan. "What's your name, dude?"

"B-Brian." Brian held his ground, despite how nervous as he looked. "I mean, I don't mind, it's none of my business, but... it's a pretty big deal. They're saying you're dating."

Kevin tried not to remember his media training and not react to that. "Yeah? Are we in Weekly World News or something?"

"Just a couple sports sites, and Twitter, and a Reddit feed, and..." the

guy trailed off, clearing his throat.

Kevin's face burned as his phone started to vibrate almost constantly in his hand, alert after alert hitting him. He took a quick glance down at his phone, then offered a tight smile to Brian. "Thanks for the heads-up. I better call my agent now. Good meeting you two."

Matty shook hands with them both and steered them off while Cam and Floyd closed in around them, leaning over their shoulders for a look at their phones.

"Oh, boy," Cam breathed out, pulling out his own and showing the rest of them.

*Kevin and Matty sitting in a tree?*

There was a blurry photo from across the arena of the two of them sitting in the bleachers, but it was impossible to make out the facial details—thank God. But it definitely looked like them.

Cam turned the phone towards himself and skimmed the article. "Who's the asshole talking to the press? Someone confirmed you're together."

"Two guesses, and the first doesn't count," Matty muttered.

Kevin felt like an idiot for not just punching Hans the first time around. "Well," Kevin murmured, swapping looks with Matty. "This is gonna be a thing."

Only once they were in the car, the kennel in the back with the suitcase, Jasmine sprawled in the middle of the backseat while Floyd sat up front with Cam, leaving the backseat for the lovers, did Floyd speak up.

"You guys worried about that, at all, or...?"

Matty shook his head slowly, though Kevin's heart still instinctively sank with worry. "No," Matty reflected. "We can get away with a ridiculous amount of PDA just from being... hockey buddies. I mean, a lot of guys go a pretty long way to be gay and people still think they're joking around."

Kevin laughed. That much was true, if he thought about it. "Sort of an open secret." He could live with that. The headlines would die down, maybe. He could call his agent later and ask if he could just be vague about rumors for a while.

He glanced down at his phone. It was Fisher.

*Want me to beat the shit out of him?? I'm on my way.*

Kevin laughed under his breath and showed Matty the text, then settled back to answer.

*Nah man. Let him torpedo himself. I won't be around him much longer.*

*You moving in???*

*Yeah :)*

*Fucking awesome. Welcome bro.*

*Thanks! See you soon.*

Kevin smiled and pocketed his phone, then looked back at Matty.

“And if we decide we wanna take advantage of this and be the poster boys, we’ll figure that out later,” Matty nodded, even though he looked nervous. “Now, what’s for supper?”

---

“Dude, you two are *boyfriends* as of, what, last week? And now you’re moving in?”

Ryan had just gotten here, his clothing still covered in sawdust, and he was trying to awkwardly avoid standing too close to the bee hives tucked into the corner of the brothers’ yards. Cam and his two brothers, Jackson and Thomas, and now all three of their boyfriends, shared one huge communal backyard space.

Most recently, Cam had put in a couple bee hives, and everyone was enjoying it. Except Ryan, when he came straight from work and the bees tried to gather sawdust from his clothes, thinking it to be pollen.

He gently brushed another couple bees off him, then shrugged off his outer shirt and left it on the grass. “They can harvest it or whatever.”

Kevin laughed, stretching his legs out from the chair on the porch. “Yeah, you know how it goes.”

“And what about Fredericton? The offer?”

That was Cam, his eyes bright and curious as he glanced between them.

“I don’t think that was legit,” Matty murmured. “I’m pretty sure that was a journalist. My agent never heard from anyone.”

“Oh, shit,” Cam muttered. “Of course. What an asshole.”

“But trades, legit trades, we can’t control,” Kevin spoke up. “Not really. We’ll move where we have to.”

Matty nodded, and he reached out to rest a hand on the plastic arm of Kevin’s chair.

Kevin put his own hand over it, well aware of the group of guys watching them both. Alex and Thomas were sitting together on the porch swing, while Chase perched on the table next to Jackson, who manned the grill. Noah was playing with Jasmine, stretched out on the grass while she tried to paw at him to play. Cam was near the hives, watching the bees work on harvesting the sawdust from Ryan’s jacket.

“If that happens, or one of us gets cut, we’ll just figure it out,” Kevin quietly said.

All of them were smiling like Kevin had just figured out the secret to life, and Matty, most importantly, was beaming at him.

It was the conversation they hadn’t really properly had yet, and it was all happening so simply. Despite Kevin’s layers of worry, it really *could* be that simple.

They could figure shit out as they went.

They didn’t have to have the answers now. That even went for Matty’s shitty family, whom he’d tried to avoid talking about on Skype, but Kevin had picked up on right away. And they’d deal with Hans when they got back to Toronto. All Kevin had to do was move out, and probably stop their friends from taking Hans out back for a kicking.

One thing at a time, and this barbecue was just about smelling ready.

## Epilogue

The guest bedroom at Cam's place had a perfectly comfortable bed, but what made it perfect was that it already smelled like Kevin after a week of him staying in it.

Jasmine was settled downstairs for the night, more than happy with the nest of blankets Noah had made for her and the treats he'd snuck her. After the barbecue, which had stretched on for a good couple hours, they'd finally drifted apart—the brothers and plus-ones to their own houses, Ryan and Floyd back to their own places.

And now, at last, Matty was more or less alone with Kevin. He'd expected the moment to be a lot steamier than it was, but despite how on-edge he was, it just felt kinda weird to mess around in their friends' room.

And now that Kevin was gonna be moving in with him at the beginning of next month, they were about to have a whole lot of time around each other.

So, instead, Matty held up the cover for Kevin to crawl under, then snaked an arm around his shoulder to pull him in nice and close.

Kevin fit perfectly against him, that hard little body nestling against his side. Kevin's hand rested on his stomach, his other arm curled awkwardly under his head.

They laughed as they found different positions to shift into, slowly finding one that was comfortable for them both and wouldn't break their necks by morning.

"It's... really nice to be out here," Matty admitted quietly. Everyone had been so damn welcoming, even though he'd hardly known the brothers except for Cam.

And Kevin looked so happy and comfortable around them, just as Matty felt around his own buddies. Hopefully vice versa now, too, as they grew acquainted with each others' friends.

"Man, it's killing me not just... crawling all over you right now," Kevin murmured, his voice husky as he rubbed Matty's arm, but it wasn't necessarily a come-on.

Matty teased back, "We've got a week out here, bro." A whole glorious

week to themselves, out in almost the middle of nowhere, with a bunch of friends. "Accidents will happen."

"I hope they do," Kevin snickered, settling his head against Matty's shoulder. His breathing was already even and deep. "I was *almost* desperate enough to ask for Skype sex, you know."

Matty laughed deeply. "I'm pretty sure we'll get the chance to get good at that."

Kevin hummed, the vibration traveling through Matty's shoulder and chest. "About that... you were cool with that, earlier? Just figuring this shit out later? I mean, that's what boyfriends do."

"Mmhmm," Matty nodded slightly, stroking Kevin's hair for a second. As he fidgeted with it, he gazed into those baby blue eyes that were so earnestly searching his own. "September's gonna get rough, but we'll plan carefully is all."

Kevin nodded, too. "And living together will make it a lot easier."

That made Matty glow all over again. "I'm glad that didn't freak you out. I just got excited."

"Me, too," Kevin admitted. "Hans is a real dick."

"He is." Matty scowled, pressing his lips into Kevin's hair. "As for moving in. I... I don't know if it's too early..."

"We've known each other a while now," Kevin laughed under his breath, but he was shifting to look expectantly at him.

That meant he knew what was coming.

"I love you," Matty murmured. "It sounds stupid, but I can't explain it. It just... happened."

"Nah, man. It's not at all," Kevin told him with a quick shake of his head, propping himself up on his elbow. "That's what people always say happens. You just *know*. And I've known for a while that I love you, too. So, I might be stupid, too," he laughed breathily.

"So," Matty echoed, his smile growing. "Cool. We'll both be stupid together, then." He tilted his head back and Kevin took the invitation, leaning down for a long, slow kiss before they settled down together again.

They had so much to talk about that Matty felt like he could chat for hours, but he was already getting so sleepy. Just having Kevin here, nestled into his arm, was enough to wash away all traces of his

stresses over the last couple weeks.

As his eyelids grew heavy, Kevin went quiet, too. The last thing Matty remembered thinking before sleep made him smile faintly.

*We're the slowest-moving fastest-moving couple I know.*

They were a couple now. Somehow, where he'd least expected it, Matty had just stumbled into the arms of this man. No matter how long it had taken them to figure it out, he was lucky beyond belief.

Hockey had brought them together, but it wasn't everything... it was just the beginning of their big, exciting lives together.



# Grind

THE RILEY BROTHERS BOOK 6

E. DAVIES

## Prologue

Ryan

He'd known they would wind up here, sooner or later.

Well, maybe not *here*. Not pressed up against James's kitchen counter, throbbing with the desire to... do anything. Touch James's cheek, rub his chest, grind against him until his knees weakened.

Thank fucking God James had invited him inside. It was impossible to miss the cues James was giving him now. He leaned back, his legs spread, pulling Ryan in against his body with one hand. His other wrapped around the back of Ryan's neck, pulling him down against his lips.

They kissed slowly, tentatively, both half-afraid to breathe a sound or make a comment. Ryan wondered if he wasn't the gun-shy one here. He'd thought it was James, but the cock pressing into his thigh argued that it wasn't. James's hands were squeezing his ass and pulling him close. James sucked on his lower lip until Ryan's eyes fluttered closed and he groaned.

One thought kept racing through his head.

*This won't end well.*

James's lips were too warm, his body too soft, his soap, coconut, and pine smell too intoxicating. He'd never thought those smells would mix so well, but on James, they were perfect.

Everything was perfect on James.

That thought was a bad sign. Ryan was smitten, wasn't he?

And James was about to tell him, as his business partner and manager, that this was a dumb idea.

To delay the inevitable shattered moment together, Ryan pressed his lips harder against James's. He gasped into James's mouth as their wet lips parted and tongues met. James was kissing him so hard he had to grab the edge of the counter. James's body was smaller, lithe against his, but strong. His body burned when their hips and cocks ground together.

Ryan had to pull back now, before they got in over their heads.

Yeah, it was a dumb idea. In about ten seconds, he'd care, but... God. Not yet, please. Not when he'd just found this feeling—the one he'd tried to forget he knew.

*Ten. Nine. Eight...*

## Ryan

The already half-built neighborhood looked different every time Ryan drove in after a weekend off. He'd been building here for the last two years. With several streets to go and winter closing in, construction had hit a frenzy.

Even working on the building site, he didn't get a feeling for the progress they were making until he was away. October felt closer now, after Labor Day. A sense of urgency had settled over the building sites again. Everyone knew the ground would freeze quickly. More snow and rain meant having to wrap all their shit up, which was a pain in the ass.

The builders were pushing hard to have all the exteriors finished by the end of October. Then, tradesmen could work inside over the winter. It made sense, but it was shitty timing. Many houses were barely framed on this crescent, which was tucked behind the few remaining trees.

Ryan's apprenticeship last summer had taught him to arrive early. Being the first to the site often meant the boss cornered him for a chat about their upcoming work. At least he usually got coffee out of it.

The site supervisor, Tan, appreciated that Ryan was always on time and didn't skip work. Ryan didn't bevel ultra-precise corners like Roger, and he didn't have delicate fingers for detailed work like Sam, but he was always on time with the right tools.

Hertz's Building had a nondescript site office—a trailer on the empty lot in the middle of the neighborhood. The ground all around was tamped down from the tire tracks of employees' cars and trucks. As he pulled into the lot, noting just a couple of other cars already there, Ryan smiled to himself. There was Tan, in the door of the trailer, holding two coffees.

He parked his truck and climbed out, slamming the door and rounding the hood to approach the trailer. "Morning," he called. "Just couldn't wait for me to get in?"

"I went to bed dreaming of you," Tan answered dryly and rolled his

eyes, shoving a coffee at him. Still, he smiled. It wasn't a harsh mockery like some men would make of that line.

Ryan appreciated it. Most of the guys knew about him and were more mature than that, but a few...

"Hope the man measures up to the legend," Ryan smirked. He took the coffee, following Tan into the site office. "How can I improve your life?"

The office was cluttered with paperwork strewn across one desk. Safety notices were pinned to the walls. Tan insisted on keeping the other desk clean except for the work of the day. As Ryan sipped his double-double he made his way over for a look.

Just what he'd expected: finishing the framing for houses 2 through 8, and what looked like a roster. "Oh, you put me with Sam again?"

"You know she needs muscle to hold things while she screws them." To his credit, Tan didn't even start laughing, like many guys would. He just shot Ryan an apologetic glance and shrugged. All the guys knew Ryan wouldn't let anything slide, even accidental comments.

Ryan liked Sam. She was tough and smart, and very good at mental math. He had yet to catch an arithmetic mistake, even though she never used a calculator. He'd found out that she had briefly been an astrophysics major. She'd rarely talked about why she'd ended up here instead. As they were often the only woman and gay man around, Sam and he got along pretty well. They had each other's backs.

"Sure," he agreed. "I'll follow her lead."

Tan rubbed his chin. "There's only a little left to do on each house, but where we lost those four hours Friday..."

Someone had fucked up a lumber order and delivered the wrong load. Nobody had been able to do much all afternoon. By the time the right truck arrived, the guys had just unloaded it before heading home.

Tan had been just about losing his shit, and Ryan didn't blame him. Managing time well was the key to meeting deadlines. As they were building so many houses at once, deadlines were the only way they'd finish before winter.

"We need some overtime this week," Tan admitted. "You interested?"

Ryan usually took it. He had no family ties like some of the guys, and no steady girlfriend like others. In fact, he hadn't dated in months. Not since Isaac had told him he was probably being transferred. He'd

disappeared the day after Ryan had said he'd like to make their friends-with-benefits relationship more serious.

Fucking liar. He'd seen him at the co-op a week later.

But Ryan had let it go months ago. He just didn't feel like getting his heart involved with anyone again. And that left him available for overtime, which meant extra money.

"Sure," Ryan agreed and looked over as the door rattled open. It was Ricky, his broad shoulders filling the frame as he edged through at an angle. "Hey, man, how's it going?"

They clapped hands and shook briskly. Ryan held his coffee cup away to keep it from spilling on either of them. Ricky headed over to clap Tan's shoulder. "Great. Good weekend. Ready to get to work."

"Well, someone's an eager beaver," Ryan snorted.

"Had a great date. You should try it sometime."

Ryan rolled his eyes. "Sounds like money down the drain."

"Always a romantic," Ricky laughed. "Tan, where am I today?"

As they settled into their workday, Ryan's mind was still on the Labor Day long weekend. He'd had a barbecue with some of his best friends, then dinner with his parents. He'd finished a few woodworking projects to sell in the business he wanted to start soon. He'd even taken a hike in the woodlot. Despite it all, something had still been missing.

He had a feeling he knew what it was, but he had no time for that.

No time, and no inclination to put his heart on the line first. That was an expensive mistake.

His mind kept coming back to Ricky's offhanded remark, though, even after work. He grabbed a quick supper and headed out to his garage workshop to finish the wine cabinet he was designing. The words played on his mind.

*Maybe I'll sign up for a dating site soon... or something.*

With this vague promise to himself, he was able to put it out of mind for the time being. He finished the cut-out scrolls before he headed inside to watch the game.

James

“Two hundred bucks brings it down to... shit, thirty-nine months.”

James furrowed his brows as he leaned in closer to the screen, then sighed. His spreadsheet didn't lie, but he didn't like the answer. His credit card interest spreadsheet came with fancy graphs and projections. The only number he cared about—the one that felt the most real—was the *months to pay off* number.

Thirty-nine months.

And that was assuming he didn't have to put anything new on the balance. The interest was killing him, but there was nothing he could do about that now.

Fucking hell. He should move out of this shitty province with its ten percent unemployment rate and seasonal work problem. Since he'd quit his last full-time job, he hadn't been able to find another steady job. Everyone was desperately holding whatever job they had. Even old people couldn't afford to retire from shitty cashier work.

There *were* jobs if you knew people, but his family wasn't from Fredericton. Living closer to them wasn't an option. Just being gay was hard enough in the capital, let alone anywhere else. A gay trans guy? Yeah, he'd escaped to Fredericton the first chance he got, and he wasn't looking back. This was better than his home town, at least.

The only thing he missed from home was the rock-climbing. It was flatter around here, with few good climbing routes. There was an indoor gym, but that wasn't the same as the experience outdoors.

“Let's see.” James took a quick glance at his job search spreadsheet. Looked like he hadn't dropped off resumes at the uptown mall in two months. That was just long enough that he should do another round there. Everywhere else he'd tried was too recent and he'd only irritate people by dropping by again.

Except his buddy, Jay, who ran a restaurant downtown. It was worth stopping by to see if they were hiring yet. In the lead-up to Christmas, they sometimes needed extra staff, especially for Christmas parties. James was hoping for at least a temporary position there.

At least his basement apartment downtown was close to a lot of workplaces. If he did get a job at the uptown mall, that would mean an hour on the bus each way. It would only be a stupid fifteen-minute drive at most if he had a damn car.

James couldn't bring himself to regret his decisions, though. He'd done what he had to for survival.

He'd pay for it for years to come, but sooner or later, it would be worth it.

---

"Jay, hey!"

"Hi, Jay."

They swapped grins. James didn't usually go by that nickname, which he associated too much with his friend. They still joked that they could stand in for each other.

Both of them had the same stereotypical look—short, stubbly, and kind of twink.

Jay hated it and constantly tried to encourage their beard to grow out into a geeky student look. Being a young restaurant manager was hard enough, let alone one who didn't fit into the gender binary and used "they" pronouns. Jay had managed for a few years now.

But James didn't mind being a pretty boy twink. He could almost grow a beard, even if it was patchy, but he usually didn't need it to be seen as a guy. Either way, it was nice to get attention from guys who didn't think he was a short-haired girl. Drunk straight boys didn't react well when they noticed five-o'clock shadow.

"How's it going?" Jay asked. James waved the stack of papers in his hand, and Jay winced. "Résumés?"

"Yep. So, you know what I'm gonna ask..." James laughed.

They smiled and punched his arm lightly. "You're top of the list, man. Business is too slow still. I'm hoping it'll pick up this month with the students back in town."

James bit back his disappointment. He'd take any job at all, and they knew that. Didn't even have to be a waiter—he'd be a busboy or wash dishes or, hell, clean the floors. Any job with a boss who called him by his real name and didn't look disgusted every time he walked into the



break room.

Thank God he'd left his cashier job, even if it had been a fight for employment since. "Looking grossed out and putting me on the cash desk furthest from the door all the time" was hard to prove. The Human Rights Commission here didn't protect the right characteristics, even if he'd wanted to go through the hellish legal system.

"I know," Jay sympathized, catching that disappointed look. Their voice dropped as they stepped closer. "You're still on for the charity auction, though?"

Bits and pieces of work like art auctions for a cause were what James relied on, so of course he was still on. "Yep. Got my best tie pressed," he joked.

They grinned. "Great. Okay, I gotta run and sort out the orders this week." They were scanning his face for signs of real distress. James knew that look—they'd given it to each other before.

James offered a reassuring smile. "Go do your thing. I'm heading up to the mall."

"Good luck," Jay wished him, and leaned in for a quick hug before striding away for their office.

For a moment, James's stomach dropped with envy. He tried not to dwell on it—he was happy when any of his trans siblings did well for themselves. Running a business in a climate like this was hard. But there was a natural envy, too, that he hadn't been able to do that yet.

James had a business degree, which was only useful for helping others with their business plans, and a can-do attitude. He had no specialized skills to market and sell. He wrote articles online and cut lawns, but those were things any kid could do.

Sometimes it felt like he'd missed all his adolescent years. He was just getting around to restarting them now. He'd wasted so much time in limbo, waiting to grow into the man he needed to be.

Things could be worse, though. They could always be worse.

He plugged his headphones into his iPhone as he headed for the bus stop, preparing for the long bus ride. One of these days, he'd get ahead.

## Ryan

As Noah ran a fingertip over the little wooden ring box, his eyes widened and smile grew. Ryan's chest swelled with pride. The finer details on it had been damn hard, especially for a guy like him. He was used to working with two-by-sixes, not two-inch cubes of wood.

He'd taken his sweet time, working over the course of a few months to try different designs for his good friend. They'd finally found a box design they both liked. Then it had been a trial of different woods and designs, and the process of actually building it.

"Wow," Noah whispered. "It's incredible. And so detailed."

"God, I'm never doing a damn ring box again," Ryan grumbled. Holding a screwdriver between his thumb and forefinger for the tiny screws of the tiny fucking hinges? No, thanks.

Noah laughed as he turned it this way and that. He played with the golden clasp and unlatched it. As he opened the box, he caught his breath. Ryan had put the smooth, velvet-covered foam inside with a slit cut in it for the ring.

It was always easy to read Noah's emotions. The spirited blond was vocal about his reactions, whether positive or negative, so the glowing praise meant a lot to Ryan. Ryan tended to be quiet, but Noah talked more, so they balanced each other out.

"Thinking about the proposal?" Ryan asked after a few moments of watching Noah's shifting expressions.

Noah touched his forehead and nodded, his gaze on the box before he flipped it shut again and drew a breath. "Yeah. It's big."

"Of course it is." Ryan hadn't known him as long as he'd known Cam, Noah's soon-to-be fiancé, but anyone could tell that they were perfect for each other. They couldn't get enough of each other. Didn't mean Noah wouldn't get a case of nerves first.

Ryan shifted nervously, hoping he wasn't going to be expected to play counselor here. He could build them a wedding bed given enough time and instructions, but helping them get there? Nuh uh. That was

up to their other friends—Thomas, soft-spoken and kind; Chase, intense and fiercely loyal; even Kevin, loud-mouthed but honest enough to tell you if you were marrying the right man.

“God, you look like I’m asking you to walk through coals,” Noah laughed as he dug his wallet out. “Don’t worry.”

“No, I...” Ryan trailed off, his cheeks flushing. He didn’t want Noah to think he didn’t care, because he did. He just didn’t know how to handle feelings as well as some.

Noah winked and handed over a wad of cash. “Don’t worry about it. Here you go.”

“Is there a tip in here?” Ryan accused, squinting at the thicker-than-expected stack of green.

Though Noah playfully shrugged, his answering grin told Ryan that he was right. “If there is, it’s well-earned.”

Ryan sighed but pocketed it, then half-hugged him. “Enjoy.”

“I will.” Noah carefully placed the box into his desk drawer, his gaze lingering on the drawer even after he shut it.

Ryan had met him at the art gallery where he worked as a curator. That way, Noah could hide the ring until he found a good hiding spot at home. He’d never actually been into Noah’s place of work before now, but it made perfect sense for him. He had art pieces scattered around the office, photos of himself and Cam—and their whole group.

*Wait a second, that photo’s from our barbecue last weekend!*

“You were quick!” Ryan laughed, pointing out that framed photo on the desk. “How sentimental. Had to make sure you had us all on your desk?” Noah was part of the glue that held their friendship group together. Ryan wasn’t missing the chance to tease him.

Noah grinned, unashamed. “A man who tries at least half a dozen times to burn the perfect bee into my wedding ring box, and gives me a choice of bees? That’s not sentimental at all.”

That was just good customer service. Ryan snorted but let him have that one, turning his back to head for the doorway of his office.

Noah laughed behind him. “But seriously, our last group photo didn’t have Matty, so...”

It was another stark reminder that Ryan was the odd one out in their group of friends—Cam, Jackson, and Thomas, the brothers at the

heart of it, and their boyfriends Noah, Chase, and Alex respectively, plus Floyd and Greyson, and now Kevin and Matty. Other friends had come and gone, but they were all still close.

And Ryan was the sad single one. The last girl standing up against the gym wall.

The mental image of himself waiting to be picked at the dance, all muscles and shy glances, made Ryan chuckle under his breath. That had never been his scene anyway.

Noah was watching him with a much-too-perceptive expression on his face for Ryan's comfort. They strode down the hall of the art gallery toward the exit. The charity art auction that Noah was curating tonight was next door, at a restaurant. Ryan was attending, along with a couple of their friends.

"Don't give me that pitying look," Ryan rolled his eyes. "I'm fine."

"I'm not pitying you," Noah piped up, laughing. "But I can work on setting up a blind date..."

Ryan flicked his shoulder. He didn't dare shove him around like he might Jackson, the blacksmith with arms bigger than Ryan's. Noah might go through the wall. "Don't."

"I'm just saying!"

Ryan shook his head. "I'd rather get my business off the ground first. I'll have time for... love... later." As soon as the word slipped out of his mouth, he almost groaned.

"Love," Noah repeated, his expression lighting up gleefully. "See? Romantic. Just say the word, I'll see who knows someone you might like."

Ryan held the art gallery door and shook his head, following Noah to the restaurant.

He didn't *need* a boyfriend, and besides, love didn't work like that. It didn't have a schedule or convenient timing. No doubt he'd stumble into it at exactly the wrong moment.

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Ryan didn't doubt that it was just Noah's teasing that was on his mind. That was the only reason he looked twice at the guy behind Jay, adjusting the number tags on the art pieces.

He was cute. Short, dark-haired, stubbled, with beautiful brown eyes.

Nothing said he was gay, but Ryan had a feeling, and he was rarely wrong. His gaydar was pretty accurate. Even if the guy was dressed like all the other event staff, there was something... tidy about him.

"Who's that?" he asked Noah, nodding toward him. "I didn't see him last time."

"Oh, that's one of Jay's buddies," Noah said. To his credit, he didn't give Ryan an obnoxious grade-school smirk while he did it. His lips were quivering in a smile, though. "Pretty sure he's gay, since that's what you're asking. Don't know if he's single..."

"Thanks, Detective. Should I just start calling you Detective Riley now?"

"Shh," Noah hissed and slapped his arm harder than Ryan expected.

Ryan jumped, then laughed and held up his hands. He wasn't going to give away Noah's secret. "Sorry, sorry. You better hurry up and do it, though," he teased. "In case you get cold feet."

Noah was only half-listening to him now, his eyes on the other side of the room. Ryan rolled his eyes. He already knew who he'd find there, and sure enough, when he looked over, it was Cam.

And Cam was giving Noah the same gooey eyes.

Fucking hell. Of all the guys, they'd been the first two to get together, but they were still the sappiest around each other. If this was what love did to a person, he was fine tinkering around in his garage.

Ryan wandered off for snacks, and, as expected, Noah barely seemed to notice him leave. He was too busy hugging Cam and murmuring to him, both of them smiling at each other.

Exasperation made Ryan's stomach clench, not jealousy.

"I should tell my curator he's not allowed to invite his boyfriend." That was Jay, laughing behind Ryan. Ryan had to look down by his shoulder to find the much shorter person. He stepped back so Jay didn't have to strain their neck. "Every time he comes with him, I have to pry the two of them apart."

"I think it's a buy one, get one free deal," Ryan smiled. "Besides, more eye candy to attract the buyers."

Having good-looking men around, even if they were gay couples, drew some women to these auctions. Noah and Cam were a fixture, and not

just because Cam had been a hockey player before his heart problem. Now, Cam worked for Noah's uncle, who was a beekeeper. People had rallied around Cam when he traveled out to Ontario for his medical diagnosis and treatment last year. They hadn't forgotten him afterward. He'd almost been famous; they could overlook the gay thing for that.

There were *some* good things about a town this size.

Ryan's gaze was drawn back to the new assistant. "I don't think he's been at the last couple auctions?" He phrased it as a question to Jay.

"That's James. I want to hire him next, whenever business picks up again enough that I can."

Ryan winced. Even as a prospective business owner, he could empathize with that. "I get that. That's why my carpentry thing's been on hold," he told Jay, folding his arms and frowning. "I need someone to do all the non-carpentry stuff: marketing, sales, networking," he explained while Jay nodded. "But I couldn't pay someone yet. It's a catch-22."

"Right. You're serious about starting this up?" Jay asked.

Ryan nodded.

"Well, there's grants, and the small business development group that can help you." Jay was in business mode now. "Do you have a business plan?"

"Sort of. I filled one out from the internet." Ryan had almost forgotten about it. Working dawn 'till dusk all summer on building sites had sapped his energy to pick it back up and finish it. "But I have to finish that first, I guess."

"You can approach the council and they'll help you finish it."

The voice near his elbow was warm and crackly, and a shiver ran straight down Ryan's spine. He didn't have to turn to know that it was James, but he did anyway, smiling warmly.

James was smiling back, nodding at Jay. "Sorry, couldn't help overhearing. But so many people don't realize that you don't have to have *everything* together to approach an incubator."

"You worked at the one on campus, didn't you?" Jay asked.

James nodded, his dark hair flopping into his eyes.

"Ohhh." Ryan shifted, turning more toward James. "So I'm talking to

an expert.”

James looked flustered, but he grinned up at him. “Sure, I’ll take the compliment.” God, he was short—had to be five-foot-seven? Six? A good five or six inches shorter, just short enough that he’d tuck under Ryan’s chin...

*Nope. This is professional.*

Ryan clearly needed to get laid before he started thinking that way about *every* new guy he met.

“He’s got a head for business,” Jay spoke up. “I’ll leave you two to it. We’ve got ten minutes before the auction starts,” Jay told James. They walked off to talk to a couple of newcomers.

That left the two of them alone, and Ryan tried to ignore the nervous tingles that crawled down his spine.

“I’m James, by the way,” the cute guy introduced himself, holding out a hand.

Ryan’s hand dwarfed James’s as he took it. “Ryan.” The moment their palms touched, an extra nervous tingle crawled down Ryan’s spine. He nodded. “Good to meet you.”

“You, too.” James took a step back, propping a hand on his hip. “So you have a business plan almost done?”

“Maybe half-done,” Ryan admitted with an embarrassed laugh. “I got confused and kind of stopped. It’s hard to budget when I don’t know what my sales projections would be.”

“Right. You haven’t done market research?”

Ryan sighed and shook his head. “No time, over the summer. Really, I’d be happy with more of a side business. Sell a few things a week. But with overtime on job sites...”

“You work in the trades?” James glanced down at his forearms, his gaze trailing up Ryan’s strong forearms and biceps back up to his face. “That explains...” His cheeks turned crimson.

“My size?” Ryan teased, the knot in his stomach uncoiling. James looked like fun to tease. “Lift shit all day and you, too, can have trouble finding shirt sleeves that fit.”

“Oh, that sounds like a first-world problem,” James scoffed. “I’m so sorry. Meanwhile, I have trouble opening jars.”

Ryan burst out laughing. “Call me, I’ll break the jar or open it.”

“No way.”

“It was a weak jar,” Ryan defended himself. His chest swelled anyway at the impressed look James gave him. It was nice to be admired sometimes, even if it wasn’t going to go anywhere.

Strictly professional, right? James was interested in his business, not him.

James confirmed his suspicion a moment later by breaking the gaze, looking back to the art pieces. “I’d better get back to work. If you wanna swap numbers, I’ll look over your plan and get you unstuck.”

“That’d be great,” Ryan admitted, grabbing his phone to enter James’s number. If nothing else, a friend to help nudge him into starting to pursue his dream would be nice.



## James

It was impossible to miss the man who walked in the door. Not Noah, a guy James sort of knew from bumping into him in passing at the restaurant, but the man next to him.

He was tall, broad-shouldered, but lean and muscled. James could tell at a glance that he wasn't the kind of guy who kissed his own biceps good night. Though he wore trousers and a dress shirt, he looked like he'd be more comfortable in jeans.

Definitely the kind of guy who tinkered with engines or built bridges or something manly as fuck.

James's first instinct was usually to be intimidated by that kind of guy. The newcomer was also good-looking as hell, though. It made James want to catch his eye and see... Well, just see.

He worked his way around the edge of the room, fidgeting with number tags, until he was close enough to listen in. James had to make sure this was one of Jay's gay friends. It could be some poor straight guy, roped into coming along, who'd run from a pretty little guy batting his lashes at him.

His interest shifted from personal to professional when he overheard them talking business, though. This was the one thing he knew enough about to interrupt—and in fact, he couldn't help himself. He didn't want misconceptions to keep *anyone* from starting a business. That went double for someone in his own community.

The moment they met, it was pretty clear that Ryan was interested in his business knowledge. James managed to fumble his way through the conversation without outright ogling him. Having Ryan's full attention on him was almost overwhelming. God, those pretty brown eyes.

James was glad for the excuse to make his way behind the tables again and start reading through the auction sheets. The work caught him up as he moved from piece to piece. It was his job to note the bids and handle the payment while Jay announced auction winners.

Cute or not, James forgot about Ryan for the next two hours. He

moved from painting to painting, making conversation with the buyers. He had to make them feel good about their donations. Repeat buyers were like gold.

Forgot about Ryan, that was, until he got to one piece, a small painting of a bee sitting on a flower petal. He listened for the name Jay called out, which was *Ryan Hart*, and then the very same Ryan walked up.

Suddenly, James wasn't in smooth "make conversation and ask for the payment method" mode. He stumbled over his words.

"Great job bidding and... choosing," James smiled when Ryan reached him. "Ryan Hart, right? Is that H-A-R-T?"

Ryan's deep voice rumbled again, sending a shiver down James's spine. "Yes, it is. Thanks. It's not for me, actually."

"Oh?" James's heart sank for a second, but he kept smiling. *Don't let it be for a boyfriend.*

"A couple friends..." Ryan leaned in. James instinctively met him halfway, leaning across the table.

He smelled like spice and pine. Oh, fuck, he smelled *good*.

"Are getting engaged," Ryan murmured. His voice was low under the crowd's babble and Jay's banter about the next piece.

"Oh. Surprise?"

"Yes. The proposal hasn't happened yet," Ryan murmured, and his gaze flicked back to Noah.

It took James a couple of seconds to clue in. "*Oh*. Oh, cool."

He'd seen Noah hanging around the guy he assumed was his boyfriend in the breaks between auctions. He was a hunky dude with a sweet smile and a crooked nose.

Ryan winked and straightened up again. "I'll save it for the wedding. Pretty sure I'll only have to store it for a couple months."

James laughed as he took Ryan's credit card to swipe. "You think?"

"Mmm. They're that type, yeah. I'd better get my suit ready," Ryan joked.

James chuckled. "There, thank you. Do you want to pick it up later or take it home tonight?"

Then, Ryan's gaze flickered up and down James's body, taking in his tie and vest and tight jeans. James's heart caught in his throat. His body prickled with pleasant heat. If Ryan took advantage of that line, he was not going to say no.

Unfortunately, Ryan just gave an easy smile and nodded. "I'll take it, yeah."

James swallowed hard. *Not everyone wants you*, he reminded himself. "Cool." New friends were fine, too. "So I'll get in touch about the business plan, if you want?"

"Yes, please," Ryan nodded. "I'll take you for coffee if that's a fair trade."

"Fair enough," James agreed. Jay was announcing the next piece, and he had to move on. "Thanks for your purchase. Our charities appreciate it."

After his standard line, Ryan melted back into the crowd and James tried to get back into the zone. Swipe the card, joke around, thank them, move on, help Jay get through these last dozen pieces before they ran over time.

He couldn't spare the time to fantasize about burly carpenters sweeping him off his feet.

Ryan

The chilly autumn breeze rustled at Ryan's back as he pushed open the door to the coffee shop.

He'd promised to meet James here. After a long damn Tuesday, it was a welcome break for him, and James had sounded excited in his text messages.

Ryan worried he'd sound like an idiot, but James had helped entrepreneurs with much vaguer ideas.

And, to be honest, Ryan was looking forward to some time spent with another guy, one-on-one. Hanging out with all his friends was fun, but it was exhausting sometimes. And not just in the "everyone else has a boyfriend-or-soon-fiancé" way. The atmosphere around them tended to be high-energy.

He hoped he didn't come off as a quiet weirdo to James. *Talk about yourself, just keep it real*, he reminded himself as he looked around the shop.

It was easy to spot James in the corner once he looked past the discarded pile of layers: coat, sweater, scarf, and gloves.

"On your way to the North Pole?" Ryan teased, grinning as he unzipped his jacket and dumped it on the opposite side of the booth from James.

James rose to his feet and laughed. He was so much shorter that he had to crane his neck back. "I get cold easily. Shut up."

Ryan's eyes still twinkled with amusement, but he let James get away without more teasing. "What do you want? I'm buying."

An odd expression—relief?—passed across James's face, and then he nodded. "Thanks."

"Least I can do. You won't be thanking me once you see my paperwork," Ryan laughed.

James waved it off and stood up to go with him to the counter. "Small mocha soy cappuccino, please."

Ryan nodded, skimming the board for something he wanted to drink. “Something to eat?”

James hesitated but forged ahead. “Blueberry bagel, please. With hummus.”

“Hummus?” Ryan questioned. He knew it was tasty on falafel wraps—a couple of coworkers had brought him out for falafel for lunch before. He didn’t make a habit of eating the stuff, though. It didn’t sound appetizing on a bagel, in the morning.

“It’s good for you, and full of protein,” James defended himself with a laugh. “Why, are you going for a Meaty McCheese snack?”

“The sausage and egg muffin.”

“Gross,” James teased. “All those fats first thing in the morning?”

“It’s only the trans ones you have to watch out for,” Ryan countered.

James burst out laughing, and Ryan stared at him for a moment. James covered his mouth, muted chuckles still escaping. “Sorry. Yeah.” He was bouncing on his toes, his eyes sparkling.

Ryan liked the energy that seemed to be sizzling under his skin. He was a lively one, and better yet, James kept grinning at him like they were in on a shared secret.

Ryan recited their order of drinks and food—he took a double-double coffee with the gross sandwich he intended to fully enjoy.

“So you’re vegetarian? Vegan?” Ryan asked when they moved to the pickup side of the counter.

James chuckled. “Something like that.”

“Why? Health?”

“A bit of this, a bit of that. I’ll sometimes cave on my mom’s neighbors’ eggs—they have chickens. But meat’s right out. And dairy...” James shuddered.

“Not even cheese? How do you survive?”

James looked mischievous as he leaned up toward Ryan, his voice low. “Vegans taste better.”

Ryan didn’t know what to say that, except to laugh and try *not* to picture James squirming on the bed under him. James was cute as *hell*, but that didn’t mean he was going to fuck him. No matter how much the heat tingled down his spine every time he brushed against

James's arm.

"You're redder than the ketchup on your gross snack choice," James teased.

Another laugh bubbled from Ryan as he shook his head. James was one of those cute, wicked smart boys Ryan had always admired from afar. He wasn't sure he could keep up with his witty tongue, but he'd love to try. "Are you dating anyone?" Ryan asked, before he thought about it. Then, he realized how inappropriate that could be. "I, um, if you want to say," he added.

A startled laugh escaped James as he shook his head. "I don't mind. Nah, I'm not. You?"

"Nope," Ryan said simply.

There was a moment of silence between them as Ryan's eyes met James's beautiful brown ones. Then, they both spoke at once.

"The last guy—"

"I'm not—"

Ryan gestured for James to keep going.

"The last guy was a jerk, in retrospect. I haven't dated steadily since," James finished. "Ugh, guys."

"Tell me about it," Ryan smiled. "Late last year, my sort-of-boyfriend pretended to transfer out of town. I'm not really looking right now."

James looked offended on his behalf, recoiling and shaking his head with a slight gasp. "What a dick."

Ryan shrugged, though he appreciated the sympathy. He picked up the coffee cups when the barista delivered them. "I'll bring these back to the table."

"Sure."

When James joined him at the table, he pushed Ryan's plate as far away from him as he could. He playfully put the napkin holder between them with a flick of his wrist. "That's better."

Another laugh bubbled from Ryan's chest. He sipped his coffee, gazing across the table at James for a second. It was easy talking to him. His face was an open book. "So, do you work for Jay?"

"Just odd jobs for now," James told him. "They call me for events and stuff. They said they want to hire me when business picks up, but you

know. This economy and all.”

Ryan nodded. He didn’t know Jay well—Noah and Chase talked about them a lot, but they didn’t tend to hang out together. Still, they seemed all right. It had taken Ryan a while to learn their pronouns, so he’d awkwardly avoided them when talking to Noah or Chase until he was sure he’d get it right. “They seem like a good boss. You’re looking for a job?”

“I’m always applying for jobs,” James grimaced. “Someday. What about you?”

“Carpentry. Finished my apprenticeship last year. I build houses on the north side.”

“Oh, you’re responsible for all that suburban growth,” James grinned. “That sounds like tough work. Do the guys you work with... know about you?”

Ryan might have rebuffed the question, but James looked curious and open. Somehow, he didn’t mind talking about this shit with the guy, even though he barely knew him. “Most of them. Of them, most of them are okay with it.”

“There’s always some, though,” James muttered.

Ryan nodded, letting silence fall for a few moments.

“That’s why I quit my last job, at a grocery store. I could have pursued legal action, but...” James shrugged, putting down his cup in favor of the bagel. “Whatever,” he said around a mouthful.

Ryan nodded, finishing his sandwich. He understood the desire to just be done with it. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m glad to be out of there. New chapter and all.” Still, there were stress lines around James’s eyes as he smiled. Ryan’s gaze lingered on them for a few moments. James caught his eyes, licking the hummus off his fingers as he finished his bagel. His tongue circled his fingertips, and he wasn’t looking away.

Ryan knew he was blushing again. He grabbed napkins to wipe his hands off, then rummaged in his bag for papers, refusing to look up again for a few seconds. When he did, James was smirking, but mercifully, he didn’t say anything. “So, uh, my business plans... woodworking.”

“Right.”

“I want to start a woodworking business. Standard farmer’s market

thing,” Ryan told him. “Friends and family are always buying things. They said I should sell to the public, not just friends of friends.”

James’s eyes lit up. “Yes. That’s a great opportunity. And you clearly have the skills. You’re not considering doing custom work?”

“Not until I have a few years’ more experience. I still learn every day on the job,” Ryan told him. It wasn’t a blow to his pride to say so—just a matter-of-fact admission. “But I’ve been building things since workshop class in high school. I feel more confident doing that. Besides, I don’t have the time to work on custom projects. This kind of stuff, I can pick up and put down.”

James was nodding, leaning back with one hand wrapped around the cup. The other arm was folded across himself.

The ache was itching in Ryan’s muscles after the work day. He shifted and rolled his shoulders to keep it from settling in just yet. It was a familiar, bone-deep exhaustion. He’d used it as an excuse for the last year as to why he hadn’t already started his business.

“What do you need?” James asked.

That was an interesting question. Ryan blinked for a second, startled, then thoughtful. “I need... someone to handle the business side of things. I can make things. It’s everything else I don’t have time and energy for. My brother and some of my friends keep suggesting I hire someone or partner with someone. I’ve never found someone with enough of a head for business and the free time. Once the expenses are paid off, a fifty-fifty profit split.”

Already, an idea was tingling at the back of his mind. He tilted his head as he watched James.

“Right,” James agreed, nodding. “So, let’s see your business plan and anything else you’ve got drawn up.”

Ryan slid his paperwork across the table, focusing on drinking his coffee while James looked everything over. His cheeks were hot with embarrassment. Waiting for a conclusion was hard, but he didn’t interrupt James.

At last, James nodded to himself and looked up. “This isn’t bad. Aside from the lack of any financial data at all,” he teased, grinning up at Ryan again as he settled back.

“I know, I know...” Ryan laughed. “I just didn’t know how to do sales projections.”



"I'm guessing you haven't done a lot of pricing research."

"Well, I know what I charge friends and family—usually materials plus labor. I know I'm supposed to charge more," Ryan explained. "And I know how much people charge for the usual tacky Christmas decorations at markets and stuff. I never sat down and decided what to make, and how many of them and when..."

James was nodding. "Gotcha. Okay..." He was scribbling notes on Ryan's papers.

God, that was cute handwriting. It suited him perfectly.

*Financial projections—market research.*

Ryan felt like he was undergoing an interview. James asked him more questions about everything he'd written, scribbling clarifications down. It was more and more impressive, though.

"And farmers' markets would be your primary sales outlet?"

"At first, I'm thinking," Ryan nodded. "If I can get in."

"Right. One of them is easier to get into as a new vendor," James told him. "The main market, not so much."

"Oh," Ryan frowned. "Really? Cam works there."

"Mhmm, because his boyfriend's uncle has been around for years. Are there other honey vendors?"

"No..." Ryan furrowed his brows.

"Because they limit competition. All markets do, to some extent. Or they could wind up with a room full of soap makers and nothing else. The application process is easy, though..."

"Right." Ryan took mental notes, but James was quickly losing him as he explained who to get in touch with and what paperwork he needed.

He must have been frowning, because James stopped. "Sorry. I can write that down for you."

"Actually," Ryan spoke up tentatively, bracing his forearms on the table. His coffee was cold now, long forgotten in favor of talking to this cute young guy who happened to be a wealth of business knowledge. "I had another idea. You don't have a job and you need one... I don't have time, but I need someone to run this..."

It was impossible for James to hide the hopeful spark in his eye. He

looked up at Ryan, his pen poised over paper and tongue stuck out between his teeth.

Ryan bit back his smile and raised his brows. "If you're interested, of course."

"Wait, you'd want to work with me?" James looked stunned. "Are you sure?"

"I'm positive." Being more of a listener than a talker gave Ryan certain advantages. He could read people pretty well. He could often tell who was an asshole and who was worth listening to and hanging out with. James seemed honest, hard-working, and clever. That was enough to get by with.

Besides, working with anyone on this would be better than doing nothing, like he had for the last year.

"Wow. Well, um." James fidgeted, his face clouding over for a moment as he looked down at the papers, clicking the pen.

"You don't have to—" Ryan started. What if this wasn't up James's alley after all?

"I want to," James interrupted, licking his lips. "You should just know, some people in town are kinda weird about me."

A guy as cute and charming as him? Yeah, he looked pretty openly gay, but Ryan was sure as fuck not holding that against him. He didn't want business from assholes who wouldn't buy from him if they knew about him, either.

"In a homophobic way?"

"And transphobic." James's face was tense, his shoulders stiff as he watched Ryan's reactions. Suddenly, Ryan was self-conscious of his reaction, which was confusion at first.

It took Ryan a second to put the pieces together. After all, he'd met—and dated—short guys with high-pitched voices before. Just to be sure, Ryan had to ask, and he spoke slowly, trying to find the best way to put it. "You're a guy now, right?"

"Compliment accepted," James responded, his face cracking into another little smile. "Yeah. *Assigned at birth* is the phrase you're looking for," he teased, his eyes gleaming. "But I was assigned female at birth." He was smiling crookedly but he was still tense, like he was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Ryan relaxed and chuckled, committing that phrase to memory.

“Sorry,” Ryan added with a quick laugh. “I mean, I know Jay, but I’ve never met... or at least never knew I’ve met... trans guys. Only trans women, and I’m gay, so I don’t date them, you know?”

“There’s more of us around than you think,” James chuckled. He was slowly relaxing, his smiles more genuine again. “But yeah, that’s why I left my last job. They wouldn’t stop deadnaming me—calling me by my birth name,” he explained before Ryan could ask. “And generally being assholes.”

“Shit.” Ryan frowned and shook his head. This wasn’t exactly the most progressive place to live. It was getting better, but it was disappointing nonetheless. “Sorry.”

“No need,” James assured him. “But now I’ve got my name changed, at least, so I can apply for jobs. But then there’s references, and my SIN number... And I can’t update my birth certificate, either.”

Ryan had never thought about that. He winced as the implications sank in. “So it’s kind of like starting afresh.”

“Exactly.”

“That’s bullshit.”

James laughed, maybe at Ryan’s straightforward bluntness. “Yeah. So if I’m selling on your behalf... some people will be weird.”

“Fuck ’em,” Ryan shook his head. “You’re cute and engaging. You worked the crowds well at the auction. That’s all I care about. Some people don’t like me, either.” He shrugged.

This time, it was James who blushed, the pink crawling up his neck to his cheeks as he rubbed at the stubble on his jaw. And somehow, he was just as cute as he had been five minutes ago, before he’d told Ryan.

For the hundredth time, Ryan dragged his mind off James’s cute smile. *You’re about to go into business with the guy. Dating him would be the worst possible idea.* He might not know much about entrepreneurship, but he knew *that* much.

“Thanks,” James laughed. “So, I know some good lawyers. They can draw up a quick letter of intent rather than a contract. It tends to be cheaper and more flexible while we work out this phase of the business.”

Shit, he knew his stuff.

“We’ll work it out so you just handle manufacturing, and I work on

the public face of the business. There'll be a lot more work upfront to build inventory and get the business set up." James narrowed his eyes, drumming his fingers. "If we move fast, we'll be ready for Christmas markets."

*Christmas?* Ryan stared. "It's only September!"

James laughed and shook his head. "I'm guessing you don't go to a lot of them. They start very soon. By October, they're in full swing."

"Oh. Shit." Ryan had never taken good note of the dates.

"Yep. What's your work schedule like this week?" James asked, digging out his phone to flip through his calendar. "I need to see your workshop and get some spreadsheets set up. And this week, and weekend, I'll look at pricing. I'll need to talk to you about material costs."

James's brain was working fifty to the dozen. "Take a look." Ryan opened his calendar app and passed over his own phone. James looked back and forth between the phones as he talked.

In minutes, he had his work schedule cut out for him: James was coming to his workshop that weekend. Then, he had to work at least an hour per day in the workshop. He found himself promising not to take on extra overtime and wear himself out, and to get proper sleep and nutrition.

He couldn't help but laugh. "Are you my life coach, too?"

"I've just seen a lot of worn-out entrepreneurs," James told him as he passed back his phone. "The first couple years are the hardest."

"Right."

Somehow, in these couple hours, he'd gone from idly looking at business ideas to setting one up, but... it felt right. And James felt like the right person to do it with.

Ryan's heart was light as he reached across the table, offering James a hand. James looked at it for a second like he didn't know what to do with it.

"To our new business," Ryan told him.

Then, James's face lit up and he gripped Ryan's hand, his palm disappearing into Ryan's but his grip firm as they shook hands.

"Our new business. Congratulations, you new entrepreneur."

*What the hell have I done?*

Then, James let go and resumed typing notes into his phone, murmuring under his breath. “Material costs... get in touch with the grant people... website... see if Harry’s here this weekend about a letter of intent.” Ryan pushed away his disappointment when James started to shrug on his jacket. It was getting late, anyway, and Ryan had to get home and eat a proper supper.

“Okay, that’s all for you,” James directed him. “I’ve got my work cut out for me this week. I’ll text you updates.”

“Perfect.” Ryan’s heart soared with appreciation for everything James was taking on board as easily as that. He had the feeling he wasn’t going to be the boss here, but he was fine with that.

They both rose to their feet, and James nodded at Ryan. “I’ll see you at the workshop on Saturday. I put reminders into your phone. I’ll take your paperwork and fix it up.”

“Okay,” Ryan laughed, waiting until James was bundled up with the folder of papers under his arm. Then, he leaned in for a quick one-armed hug. “Thanks a lot, man.”

James beamed back at him, clapping his back before he let go and offered a fist bump. “No, thank you.”

Ryan bumped their fists together with a laugh, then raised his hand in a quick wave.

His buddies had been bugging him for months to get going on this. He’d made excuses—no time, no energy, more paperwork needed. Maybe all he needed, this whole time, was a James to kick his ass into gear.

Ryan usually didn’t believe in fate, but their meeting seemed like the perfect coincidence.

James

“Aha!”

James pulled out the plaid shirt at the back of his closet, shoving the other hangers out of the way. He tried to avoid buying plaid, but he was a New Brunswicker, after all. Winter called for insulated plaid sweaters. Of course he had *some* plaid hiding at the back of his closet.

He looked so Canadian it almost hurt, but he laughed as he pulled on the red plaid shirt and tucked it into his dark jeans. Now he was dressed to meet his new business partner at the workshop.

The whole week seemed surreal. Once he got over the initial surprise, Ryan hadn't seemed fazed when James had come out to him.

James smiled as he combed his hair and brushed his teeth, glancing at himself in the mirror. These days, a lot of people had at least a basic understanding what he meant when he came out to them. And aside from a little verbal fumbling, Ryan had handled it well.

It was easy to tell who started looking for the girl they were sure was hidden within him, like he was trying to trick them. Others might not know the language but got the idea. Ryan, even if he'd been embarrassed by his ignorance, was in the latter group, which was a huge relief. Hot guys never seemed to get it.

Not that he cared how hot Ryan was. They were working together now, after all.

But with that out of the way, James had been happy to sign on as business partners. His lawyer friend was working on a letter of intent for them. James had been researching local woodworking businesses all week, up to this morning at the farmer's markets.

Both of them. Even if he'd had to take the bus to the north side market, which was a huge pain in the ass.

God, James needed a car, but thinking about his credit made James wince. It was motivation to get this business off the ground for both of their sakes.

And now he was off for a brisk walk to Ryan's house, which was about

half an hour by foot. He sometimes biked around town if the walk would be any longer. This was just close enough that he didn't mind.

This time of year, the walk was brisk, but it didn't freeze his face and hands off, at least. Soon, he'd have to switch to buses again. Getting around in winter was a lot harder than the summer because of all the damn snow.

Still, by the time he reached Ryan's house—a little bungalow with a garage almost the same size as the house, set back on the lot—his lips were numb. He had his hands shoved into his pockets. For all Ryan teased him, James wouldn't dare go out without a scarf and gloves from now until Canada Day.

It was easy to tell where Ryan was—just approaching the door, he could hear soft thuds. He knocked, and seconds later, he heard, "Come in!"

James tested the unlocked knob, stepped in, and stared.

Oh, this workshop was *sweet*. He didn't know a lot about them, but this looked comfortable to work in.

Peg boards hung along two walls. Several large shelves and chests of drawers housed more tools. Two tables were set up near the middle of the room, on either side of a table saw. Coolest of all, though, were the floor-to-ceiling windows along the back of the workshop. They looked out into Ryan's backyard and a patch of nature—trees and a stream below.

And they were on tracks. Two of them were open, ventilating the space to keep the burnt-wood smell down.

Ryan was working at one of the tables. He was shirtless, which was a *huge* distraction, but James managed not to stare at his sculpted chest and rippling abs. Instead, James glanced at his fingers—currently wrapped around a thin nail. He hammered it down in three blows. It looked like he was nailing in a backboard for some piece of small furniture.

"Hey," James greeted with a smile, his fingers closing harder around his backpack strap.

He'd worked hard to unlearn the kind of masculinity he'd always compared himself to. It was hard to remember that and not feel inadequate right now. Since he'd come out to his father, James had helped him with a few small home repairs, but nothing like this.

But he wasn't expected to *do* this, he reminded himself. He was just

the accounting nerd, customer service face, and all-around details minder.

“Hi,” Ryan answered as he hammered the last nail into place. He tossed the hammer onto the table and rolled out his shoulders as he came around the table to grab his shirt. “Sorry, I lost track of time.”

“It’s okay,” James quickly answered, his eyes flickering once more down that hard body. Warmth tingled through him, his dick twitching slightly. The biological one, of course, not the silicone prosthetic that he relied on to pass the visual and grab tests. That one needed a rod to get hard. He was lucky that his boners were a lot less conspicuous unless he was naked.

Good thing, because sweat trickled down Ryan’s muscled back when he turned his back to grab the shirt from a peg on the wall. James’s gaze followed the droplet down to the small of his back and the low-slung jeans around his hips.

Christ, Ryan was hot.

James tore his gaze off his new business partner and almost threw his backpack onto the table. He winced at the clunking sound of the binder inside hitting the metal surface.

“I’ve got a binder.”

Ryan looked confused, but he carefully nodded as he buttoned up his shirt and approached at an ambling pace. “I read about them.”

It took James a second before he burst out laughing. Ryan thought he meant a chest binder. “No, a *binder*. Of papers.”

The mortified expression that crossed Ryan’s face made James laugh so hard he had to brace his hands on the table. “S-Sorry!” Ryan exclaimed. “That seemed weird, out of the blue, but—” Ryan started to stumble over his words, and James just held up his hand.

“S’fine,” James grinned. Ryan had been researching trans stuff since their coffee meeting? That put him about a mile ahead of most people he came out to. “I don’t have to wear *that* kind of binder anymore.”

Ryan’s cheeks were still red. He was trying to push past it, though, as he strode to the sink to rinse his hands off. “Oh! Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” God, Ryan was cute when he was flustered. “Hence my need for, you know, a job. And money.” At the confused look, he added, “Had to do it on a credit card. It’s not covered provincially.”

“Ohhh. Right. So, how do we get started?” Ryan was ready to go,



approaching the table and rubbing his hands together, all business.

James admired that go-get-it attitude. It energized him, too. “I did our market research on the other woodworkers in the area, what prices they charge, what they sell. In the process, talking to them, I found out that most people seem to specialize in one type of product, or at least one scale. The guys who do outdoor furniture mostly do *just* that. The kitschy gift stalls make all the wine bottle racks and front door signs.”

Ryan was nodding. “I knew that.”

“So, you build...” James squinted at the piece Ryan had been building when he came in. “What, primarily?”

Ryan grabbed it and hefted it upright. It was a shelf that stood about three feet tall. “A lot of practical stuff—shelves, trunks, furniture. I just got into small-scale work, though. I made that ring box I mentioned for my friend.”

“Oooh, right,” James grinned. That was sweet. Ryan came off as a closet romantic. “Can I see any examples?”

Ryan pushed away from the table to rummage around bins in one of the shelves. He came back with a handful of cubes made from different woods, which he scattered across the table. The designs instantly caught James’s eye. All were in an unfinished state—some missing hinges or lids.

“Prototypes, obviously,” Ryan explained.

“Right.” James picked up one, running his thumb along the dark wood. This one was almost done, with hinges and a clasp. When he flipped it open, the inside was still rough. “This one’s eye-catching.”

“That was his second choice,” Ryan said.

James nodded to himself. He rummaged through his binder to pull out a pricing spreadsheet. “Let’s create a product line.”

Ryan let out a sigh, and James looked up at him with a frown, but Ryan was grinning. “Oh, thank God. Just tell me what to make and I’ll do it. I’ll even make ring boxes.”

“You like to be ordered around?” James teased, uncapping his pen with his mouth.

Ryan winked, and James tried to ignore the way his heart soared. They both knew this wasn’t serious, but he’d forgotten what it was like to just idly flirt with a buddy.

That was all this was, after all.

Ryan

James knew his shit.

It took a while for Ryan to list everything he'd built for friends and family over the last couple of years. He had to answer James's questions about material costs and how long it took him to build things. It was kind of sexy watching him punch numbers into his calculator, his brow furrowed like an accountant's.

He worked with numbers a lot himself, and James was able to do a surprising amount of mental math too. God, geeks were cute.

He pushed the thought away as James pushed a list across the table.

"Whoa."

It looked like a price list—wine racks for eighty bucks, shelves starting at a hundred, coffee tables for a couple hundred. Simpler items like small boxes started at twenty. The list just went on from there.

"Isn't this what everyone else makes?" Ryan asked. He might not go to craft fairs as such, but he did talk to other carpenters in town. He'd been down to the farmer's market, too. There were enough plans on Pinterest for wine racks that he knew he was going to have competition with this kind of product mix.

"Yes, which is exactly what we want," James told him, leaning over the table. They were sitting on bar stools on opposite sides of his work table, the paperwork spread out between them.

"But..."

"It's not competition. The reason people are selling them is because they already sell," James explained. Though he was trying to explain something he knew far better than Ryan, he wasn't condescending. "So you meet an existing demand instead of trying to create a new one."

That made so much sense Ryan didn't know what to say. "Oh."

"The lightbulb moment, huh?" James laughed. "I've watched that look a lot. So many people figure they'll do something brand new and

inventive. People don't want that. They want a wine rack for Uncle Greg, or... or a *home, sweet home* sign for Mom's front door."

"But we can put a new twist on some of these things, right?"

"Bingo," James nodded. "The same thing, but with fancy scrollwork or wood-burnt designs or something on the wine rack. Or a *Mr. and Mr.* sign for the front door..."

"I'll sell about six of those," Ryan laughed richly. "All to my friends."

"Hey, you might be surprised," James grinned. "Just having one or two pieces can get you custom work. But I won't let you stock an inventory that won't sell. At least, I'll try not to." His smile faded, and Ryan leaned in as he looked more serious. "This isn't a business I know *very* well. This is just my week's research."

"I know," Ryan assured him. James's concern was sweet, but he knew the risks of starting a new business. Yeah, it was possible he'd end up with bins of unpopular kitsch, but there was no other way to learn what was hot until he started to sell. He couldn't do that without inventory. "I've been saving to start this up. I can afford some losses." A starting salary for a carpenter at his company was high enough that he didn't worry about it.

"That's the other thing. I... I obviously can't contribute financially to the material costs yet—" James began. He fidgeted with his pen as he frowned his apology.

Ryan reached across the table to quiet him by putting a hand on his arm. "You're putting a shitload of time into this instead. I'll claim material costs from our profits first, but not labor. You tell me when you need money for startup costs—website locations or whatever you texted about last night—"

"Hosting," James laughed.

"That," Ryan waved a hand and laughed. "The profits, once we recover our out-of-pocket costs, are shared fifty-fifty. That's what the lawyer's drawing up already, isn't it?"

"It is," James confirmed, letting out a quick breath and smiling at him again.

"Perfect."

Ryan wasn't worried for a second. For him, it was more of a side business. It wasn't like he was planning to quit his job to sell tacky garden edging fences. James had more to lose, so even if he was

putting less into it upfront, Ryan trusted him to make good on his word.

“Now, grants, and the business plan.” Ryan groaned, and James laughed. “I’m not letting you get away without reading what I have written to submit.” James rubbed his hands together as if he were cold.

Ryan pulled the next folder toward him, then waved around the workshop. “This isn’t exactly the most comfortable place to work from, is it? You can come into my house for coffee and warmth.”

“Oh, if it’s no trouble. If you feel more comfortable—” James started, and Ryan rolled his eyes.

“Get your ass inside before your fingers fall off,” Ryan instructed him. “Besides, I can write off part of my house as an office that way.”

James’s answering laugh, warm and rich, made a pleased shiver run down Ryan’s spine. Under any other circumstance, inviting him in for coffee could mean something else, but... it was too late for that.

Business and pleasure didn’t mix.

Cam

“Earth to Mr. Carpenter, come in?”

Noah snapping his fingers in front of Ryan’s face made Cam laugh. Polite as he was around strangers, his boyfriend was so cheeky to their friends.

Ryan laughed, too, as he shook his head. He’d been staring off across the barbecue while Jackson and Chase pretended to argue over who had to prep the salad for their Sunday get-together. “Sorry.”

Alex, private investigator and always the perceptive one, was watching Ryan. “What’s on your mind? Besides the new business?”

“Just that,” Ryan admitted. “It’s a big step.”

“Of course!” Cam agreed. “And with a new business partner. I mean, Jay knows him, so I trust him, but...”

Ryan’s response was quicker and more defensive than Cam expected. “He’s solid.” He didn’t elaborate on *why* exactly he trusted the guy to build and market the whole business for him, except the allure of half the profits.

Cam swapped looks with Jackson, then Noah. Chase was the one who said what everyone was thinking: “So, *how* cute is this guy?”

“Pretty cute, if I remember right,” Noah chimed in, his eyes twinkling mischievously. He slid open the patio door and beckoned Jackson to check on the burgers for him. “And if I remember Ryan’s double-take right.”

Ryan’s cheeks flushed, but he didn’t have a chance to defend himself before Noah slid the glass door shut.

“I’m—I’m not—”

Noah pointed at the door, then his ear, and shrugged, his head tilted. *Can’t hear you*, he mouthed.

Cam snorted with laughter, then punched Ryan’s arm. “So, *is* he cute?”

“It’s business now.”

Aha. Ryan wasn’t outright denying the possibility for attraction. Cam knew Ryan well enough by now to know what that signaled: he’d be interested if he felt he could be. He was old-fashioned that way. He’d never been on Grindr, and from their conversations about hookups, they were rare for him.

That thing with Isaac last year had been an exception, and look how that turned out. Cam’s blood still boiled at the memory of catching Isaac at the grocery store a month after the breakup. Cam had chewed him out for lying about moving out of town after Ryan had talked about his feelings—a rare move for a guy like Ryan.

Since then, he must have *really* moved, because none of them had stumbled on him again, which was unusual for a town this size.

But since that breakup, Ryan had shown zero real interest in romance or being set up with anyone... until now.

“That’s tough,” Alex agreed. He leaned into Thomas on the couch and absently rubbed the back of his boyfriend’s neck as Thomas closed his eyes. “You’ve been looking livelier, though.”

Cam nodded in agreement, along with several of the others as Jackson and Noah came back in bearing plates of hot barbecued food.

“Having something to do besides work for The Man is kinda nice,” Ryan admitted. “Even if it’s weird. Anyway, how was the week for you guys?”

“Busy,” Cam told him. “Just pulled off the last of the honey, starting to feed the bees. I have to inspect the ones at home here—”

“You should wait until we’ve got everyone over,” Noah interrupted. Cam raised his brows.

“Wait, why?”

“Not all of us have seen inside.”

“Yeah,” Jackson chimed in. “Floyd and Greyson wanted to see how it works too.”

Cam thought that was weird, but he could see the point. “I don’t have enough bee suits for everyone.”

“That’s fine, we’ll stay back,” Jackson nodded. “But before the bees go away for the winter—”

“They don’t *migrate*,” Cam rolled his eyes with exasperation.

“I meant hibernate, or whatever,” Jackson defended with a laugh. “Before then, it’d be cool to show everyone.”

That did actually sound kind of neat. Cam agreed with a shrug. “Cool. When’s our next chance? Has to be a cloudy day, not too warm or cold. Actually, isn’t everyone coming over next weekend for our end-of-summer thing?”

“Mmhmm,” Noah nodded, looking pleased with himself. “And I checked the weather. It’s good for beekeeping.”

Noah had been around bees longer than Cam had, since it was *his* uncle Cam worked for and had learned from. Still, Cam felt proud when Noah showed off bits of knowledge.

Ryan was gazing off again, looking kind of distracted, and Cam nodded at him, then grinned at Noah. He leaned in to kiss him, ignoring his brothers’ groans. “Sounds perfect. Just like you.”

Noah beamed back at him, warm and solid tucked in against his side. He pecked his lips. Those bright eyes were fixed warmly on him.

“Oh, God.” That was Ryan, in a mumble. He’d snapped back to. “Slap me if I ever do that.”

Cam burst out laughing, his arm around Noah for a moment. He patted his boyfriend’s ass and let him go to grab the condiments.

All things considered, Ryan had put up with being the only single guy in their crowd pretty well. Cam had a feeling that wasn’t going to last for long. From the sly looks being exchanged between his brothers and their boyfriends, everyone was thinking the same.



James

“You’re still paying off your card?”

James bit back an annoyed grind of his jaw as he looked over his dinner plate at his mother. Mom’s tone made it clear that she still thought he’d been “impulsive and reckless” to put the surgery on his credit card.

“Yes.”

She made a *hmm* sound and focused on eating again while he tensed up, waiting for the next verbal assault.

Try as he had, he’d never been able to make her understand how damn important it had been to him. First, it had helped him in being read as male full-time, instead of some weird, awkward combination of reactions from different people. Second, it had given him one fewer thing to direct his self-hatred at.

He generally loved himself these days, and it was an odd change. Freeing, to say the least. Sure, there were bad days, and he wasn’t *thrilled* with his body, but who was? Now, he could actually nod and smile when people tried to relate to him by saying they had body features they didn’t like. Before, he’d had to grit his teeth and try not to snap at them.

These days, he didn’t look in the mirror and promptly want to go to bed again and never wake up. Until someone made him second-guess himself, or tried to force the issue with false concern—concern-trolling, it was called—or hatred. Someone like his mother.

*But what if you’re not sure? I’m just worried for you.*

He’d once hoped that afterward she would see how much happier he was and understand. But no, she still didn’t.

“I was thinking... James...”

He could hear the air-quotes around his name; she still spoke like she expected it to be a phase, some kid wanting to be called Batman.

“If the debt is burdening you, you know we can help.”

It wasn't the offer it sounded like. James knew *that* by now. It would come with strings attached. *Forgive us the slips of name and pronouns, or laugh along when we joke about you. Then, take the jobs we tell you to take and move where we tell you to move, because now you owe us and we can hold that over you.*

To be fair, his stepfather wasn't as bad as his mother. Robbie was out of town for a couple months at a time, including right now. He didn't understand, but he'd started out a pretty decent guy. It was the fucking church she dragged him to. That, and an unwillingness to get between mother and son—or mother and daughter, as Mom still said—that kept him from saying anything.

"Thanks, but I'm good," he answered, as always.

She smiled and picked up her fork again. "However much you change," and he didn't miss that implication, "you're still my little girl."

*She's talking loud enough for people to overhear.* It was unconscious by now: James swept the room with his peripheral vision. He checked for nearby waiters or tables, seeing who was around to hear it.

He'd started "living as male," however bullshit that phrase was, the moment he'd moved out to Fredericton. Most people, those he'd had to show ID to aside, knew him as a guy. Some people didn't even know he was trans. Not as many as he'd like, but some. And he tried to be careful about who found out. Random strangers knowing was a great way to get beaten up in a parking lot.

James's mom had no idea how much it took to hold his temper in check. He bit back the resentment and anger, a now-familiar taste in his mouth. Then, he licked the welt on the inside of his cheek. "Your son," he said tightly.

Mom glared at her salad. His mother's expression warned him not to talk about it, so he looked down at the table.

They pushed back their plates in silence, and his mother signaled the waiter for the bill. While they waited, she looked back at him. "I hope you put that degree of yours to use."

"Actually..." James began, then hesitated. *Wait. No. I don't want her finding out about this and meddling. She'll find out from a friend of a friend who goes to a market. But I can put that off.* "I have some ideas. Making contact with small business owners."

"You know Greg, who owns the gas bar?" Did he know Greg who

owned the gas bar? The guy he worked for that summer at the car wash—when he'd been the oddball in a group of bikini-clad girls and shirtless guys hoping for tips? Duh. He hadn't been away *that* long. James resisted the urge to be sarcastic and just tightly nodded. "Well," his mother continued like she didn't notice his eye-roll, "he's hiring. If you grew out your hair..."

"Guys with long hair don't go over well back home, Mom," James reminded her. He had to steel himself for another skeptical eye-roll in response from her. Sure enough, there it was. "I'm fine, but thanks."

"If you insist," she responded. "I told him you might be looking for a job and he said he would have hired you back."

They didn't say much until they got out to the car, the tension almost at a breaking point.

It always seemed to be at that point: sizzling, red-hot, ready to explode if not for both of them holding back harsher words. Not that there was much point—they'd both said them before.

But that was what it was like on his mom's side of the family. Everyone smiled in public, however forced it was, and then had it out in private. Told each other they were going to regret it later—but so far, neither of them had been right.

At least he had an okay relationship with his dad. Talk about breaking the stereotypes.

"Will you be visiting soon?" his mother asked once she got to the car. "Do you need a ride anywhere before I go?" She was on her way to some important government meeting. As always, she'd stopped to see him and lecture him on his poor life choices beforehand.

"For Thanksgiving, at least, yeah. And no. I'm walking around for... job stuff," he told her, waving. "Gotta go."

She paused, tugging her skirt down and looking him over critically. He prepared for more critique: he hadn't shaven in a few days, and his stubble was thick and hard to ignore. One more reason it shocked him that she could even default to *my little girl* anymore.

Everything had changed, but she refused.

His mother was quiet for a moment, and James's heart rose. Sometimes, just occasionally, she seemed to take a step back and think about what she was saying. Now and then, he could pretend they had a good relationship.

“Take care,” she told him, reaching out for a hug. “And call me if you need anything.”

James couldn’t say no to that—couldn’t take the moment to call out that bullshit. He leaned in and squeezed her in a quick, manly hug, then kissed her cheek before he pulled back.

“You too. You look good, Mom. You’ll rock the meeting.”

Her face cracked in a quick smile. Normally, she might have enthused about where she got the skirt, how lovely he’d look in that shade of cream. For goddamn *once*, she didn’t. She just waved off the compliment, thanked him, and said goodbye as he walked toward the hardware store downtown.

Sometimes it was the little things that meant the most.

---

“You met your mom today? Dude, I’m sorry.” Jay winced as they rifled through the stack of checks. “Did it go better this time?”

James would never forget the spectacular falling-out he’d had here with his mom last Christmas, or the gesture of friendship when Jay had found him in the bathroom afterward to silently hug him.

“Yeah... I think so.”

Since then, of the few friends he talked about family issues with, Jay was one.

“Good. Here’s yours.”

Plus, Jay had been cool with making out checks to his old name before he could get it changed on his fucking bank account. That was something else he didn’t like to think about, because it pissed him off.

James smiled every time he saw *James White* on a check now. Sure, his bank still called him Miss on the phone sometimes, because the shitty province wouldn’t update his birth certificate. There was just no policy at all for that yet. But it was another small step.

“Thanks. She offered to help me with the surgery debt,” James rolled his eyes.

Jay nodded, looking wary. “And? Just for no reason?”

“I know, right? She didn’t say. The catches will be numerous, believe me.”

“Right,” they nodded. “Sorry.”

“Oh, it’s okay. It went better than it could have.” James flicked the check against his fingers. “And there’s better news. Your friend Ryan?”

It took Jay a second. “Oh, Noah’s friend? The carpenter? Yeah?”

“I’m working with him on starting his new woodworking business. Fifty-fifty profit share, I do all the legwork, he does the manufacturing.”

Jay’s face split in a grin. “Dude! Good work!”

“Thanks,” James grinned back. “He offered, just out of the blue. I guess I impressed him—”

“Oh, you did.” Jay didn’t often tease him, but the smirk on their face as they sipped their coffee was unmistakable.

James shot them a *really?* look.

“What? He was so checking you out,” Jay laughed, shrugging widely. “I couldn’t *help* but notice.”

“We’re going to be *running a new business together*,” James emphasized, kicking Jay lightly. “You of all people know what that’s like. I don’t need any temptation.”

“Mmmm. He *is* tempting,” Jay smiled into their coffee cup, then almost choked with laughter when James blushed. “You thought so too. I saw you checking him out right back. I knew it!”

James rubbed at his face and pocketed his check, trying not to laugh. “You’re a jerk. I have to go buy tools.”

“Oooh—”

“*Jay*,” James burst out laughing now, unable to help it. “Not *that* equipment. I’m pretty sure he’s a top, anyway.” The muscles on him? The way he walked with that rolling swagger?

“You can’t just assume that,” Jay winked.

“I know, I know.”

God, James hadn’t gotten laid in forever. He had to get out to their nightclub—the only one in town, or in the whole area—soon. Most of his Grindr messages lately were guys asking him what FTM meant and whether he was hung. He didn’t have time for that.

“Anyway,” Jay laughed, “I’ll catch you around. Let me know how it

goes.”

“See you next week,” James waved. Though he rolled his eyes on the way out the door, he was smiling, too.

So far, Ryan seemed sweet, trusting... perhaps *too* trusting... and well-grounded. And his sense of humor was awesome. James didn't mind teasing when it was coming from a guy as hot as him.

*Fuck, now Jay has me thinking about him all over again.*

Then again, what was the harm in daydreaming on his walk to the downtown hardware store?

Ryan

“How’s it going, Tan?” Unusually for him, Ryan didn’t wait for an answer before he plunged ahead. “I can’t do overtime starting next week. Just thought I’d give you a heads-up now.”

Tan looked like he had to sit down—not with worry or outrage, but pure surprise. “You don’t want overtime? Did you suddenly get a, uh, someone special?”

Ryan’s lips twitched at Tan’s inability to say the word *boyfriend*. To be fair, it could be out of consideration. Not everyone around the job site knew—tradesmen coming in for the day’s work, for example. “Nah, not quite. Starting a business.”

Ryan had talked to Tan about it before, so Tan lit up with a smile of recognition. “Selling things? You’re finally doing that?”

“Why does everyone say *finally*?” Ryan grumbled.

Tan laughed. “Cause you’ve been making stuff for years, maybe?”

“Well...” That was true. Even back in high school after woodworking class, Ryan had been making and selling simple stuff—birdhouses, mainly—to his mom’s friends. He’d just never opened it to the public, per se.

It was lunchtime. Ryan shrugged off his jacket so he didn’t get insulation bits in his food.

Tan nodded. “See? About time you got paid properly for it.”

“Thanks.” Ryan punched Tan’s arm and took the sandwich he offered, strolling out with him to the front step of the half-finished house. He picked his way around a pile of boards and scraps of insulation.

They sat on the porch, legs dangling off the edge, coffee and sandwiches in hand. He didn’t care if *some* people thought him eating lunch with the boss was sucking up. He and Tan had been buddies for longer than he’d worked for him.

They’d first met a couple of years before that, actually, at the town lumberyard. They’d been competing to buy the same load of discount

lumber—each on their company’s behalf. Ryan had been working as general help for another company while he learned the ropes, before his formal apprenticeship. Though Tan had won that battle, they’d wound up striking a friendship at a bar that night.

“What’s up?” Ryan asked Tan, giving him another quick sideways glance. He seemed subdued today. Ryan wasn’t sure Tan would want to talk about it, but he’d test the waters.

“Oh, you know. Stressed about deadlines.”

That *did* make Ryan feel guilty. After all, he’d just ditched overtime shifts from now on. But God knew he’d been working them all summer.

Tan held up a hand before Ryan could think much more about that. “I’m not blaming you,” he added firmly. “God, go start your business. I think that’s great. Just... some people aren’t pulling their weight.”

Ryan knew exactly who Tan meant—Roger—but he didn’t comment. He nodded.

“The boss is noticing, and I have to deal with it. I hate dealing with it. Why can’t people just treat it like a real job, not make me have to babysit?”

Ryan winced in sympathy.

“Pretty much everyone here is great,” Tan hastened to add, “but those one or two, oh boy.”

Roger had to make up half of the problems on Tan’s desk. Frankly, Ryan didn’t know why he hadn’t just let him go already. Except that would leave them shorthanded on guys who could do the precise work they needed on interiors. When he did show up, Roger did good work.

He just spent too much time across the border. He liked gambling and drinking at the backwoods strip bars in Maine, telling his wife it was trips with his buddies. Ryan knew the kind of places Roger went to. It wasn’t his place to tell her what she already probably suspected, though.

“That aside... everyone else has been stepping up,” Tan determinedly continued, as if not to end on a negative note. “We’re just about winter-proof already. If we can get some extra families moved in before Christmas, that’d be great.”

That was the secret target they all wanted to hit: getting more families their new homes in time for the holidays. Ryan felt another thrill of



resolve with the reminder.

Sam came up to them with a grin and wave, clutching her travel mug of coffee. She'd been off for lunch for longer, so she'd probably headed home to check on her kid. Her boyfriend had been killed in a head-on collision with a moose three years ago. His parents watched her five-year-old for now. She worked as much as she could now, knowing that when he was older, summers would be her busiest season and his free time from school. That wasn't going to be a nice schedule to figure out.

"What's happening?"

"Hey, Sam. Overtime's going," Ryan told her.

Sam's face lit up as she looked at Tan. "Really? I'd have to check with my mom, but..."

"Yeah, you get the next shot at it. I'll wait to hear back from you," Tan promised her with a smile.

"Thanks!" Sam sat on the edge of the porch and kicked Tan. "Dude, you should see what Ricky fucked up today."

Tan looked hesitant, the coffee cup raised halfway to his lips. "Do I want to know?"

"Yeah, he fixed it with a *really* clever dado," she laughed. "I'll show you when you're over there."

As Ryan settled into chatting with Sam and Tan, he dug out his phone to send a text to James.

*How's it going? Just quit overtime shifts starting next week.*

Moments later, he had his answer.

*Awesome!! My lawyer friend has the letter of intent ready to go and I picked up the parts you asked for. I think.*

Ryan chuckled.

*Send a pic.*

Moments later, he had it, and he zoomed in on his phone, bringing it close to his nose.

"Uh oh. Someone's getting dick pics," Sam commented as he checked out the hinge size and answered.

*Yeah perfect! thanks.*

It took him a moment to realize that comment had been aimed at *him*. It took him one more moment for his brain to realize he wouldn't mind that. Ryan's head snapped up as he stared at his friends. "Hey!"

Shit, he was blushing. Oh, they were *never* going to let this go, and Tan and Sam's laughs were both wicked.

He was screwed.

"Business shit. My new business partner picked up some hinges, that's all."

"For what?"

"Wedding ring boxes."

"Oooh, he moves fast," Sam smirked, leaning back against the porch post. She raised one knee to prop her coffee on it.

Ryan eyed her but decided to laugh anyway. Normally he'd have laughed at the idea of him getting married to *anyone*. But that was before he'd met someone who got his life into order without blinking twice, put up with his bad jokes and attempts at flirtation, and pushed him into doing what he'd always wanted to do, all at once.

When he thought about it, it actually terrified him that he didn't take it as a joke immediately.

*You've known the guy all of a week and a half! Knock it the fuck off.*

A moment later, his phone chirped with a text message, and Sam imitated the chirp.

He flipped her off and checked.

*Free to meet tonight?*

Ryan didn't have to bother checking his calendar.

*Yep come on over. I've got freezer Chinese.*

James's response was fast.

*I'll bring the fortune cookies.*

Ryan turned his phone more toward himself as he answered. He ignored the others in the background trying to sneak looks at his phone.

*You're already bringing the luck. :)*

James's response was a single smiley emoticon. He took that as

permission to end the conversation and pocket his phone again.

When he saw the smirks on Tan's and Sam's faces, he rolled his eyes.  
"Oh, grow up."

Was he really that desperate for a hobby and a date? Everyone around him was so thrilled that he'd finally started a business, and was doing it with another guy who happened to be fucking adorable.

His friends laughed but let it go, talking sports instead until their lunch break was over.

James

This time, instead of heading to the workshop, James knocked on the front door of Ryan's house. He shifted from foot to foot, trying not to feel like he was here for a date.

It didn't help when Ryan answered the door in a tight t-shirt that showed off *all those biceps*.

"Hey!" Ryan beamed and James dragged his eyes up to his face, grinning back at him. "Come in."

"Ohhh, God, that smells good," James groaned. It took him a second to realize how sexual his moan had been, and he laughed sheepishly. "Sorry. Hungry."

He wasn't eating well these days. He already had oatmeal most mornings, as much as he wanted to blow his food budget on Cap'n Crunch. For other meals, he ate a lot of rice and beans. At least being veggie was financially practical, as well as the right choice for him. He saved a lot of money on meat. The tricky part was fresh veggies, but he'd gotten pretty creative with frozen.

It was a terrible juggling act: trying to keep enough in his checking account to live while paying as much as he dared to the credit card company so the interest didn't fuck him over in the long run.

Needless to say, he hadn't had Chinese in a while.

"I've got the table set," Ryan jerked his thumb toward it. "You bring my hinges?"

"Don't worry, dude, I've got your hinges." James laughed and shrugged off his backpack, setting it by the door. "And I talked to someone about an ongoing contract—we'll chat after food."

He was proud of that one. He'd stopped by a custom jeweler—a little mom-and-pop operation—to ask whether any customers showed interest in local products.

The jeweler had loved the idea. Supporting local businesses was the trend of the day. Being able to put a locally-made ring in a locally-made box would thrill them. Not everyone would take the option, but

some would. It could be occasional, but steady, work for them.

Ryan lit up. “Thanks! Sounds great. How was your day?”

Before he knew it, James was sitting at the table. Supper was veggie spring rolls, from-frozen orange tofu, and fried rice for him. Ryan chowed down on orange chicken.

He couldn’t remember the last time a date had cooked a tofu version of a meal just for him, let alone a business partner.

But it was exactly what Ryan would do—had done—because Ryan seemed to respect him. He still felt a bit like an impostor, barging in and taking over this business to make it from scratch. Ryan’s trust in him went a long way toward alleviating that.

It helped that when he started talking about parts prices for the boxes and sale prices, Ryan listened intently.

In fact, Ryan seemed to listen well in general. James wasn’t even self-conscious about how much he talked with Ryan listening.

Once supper was over, Ryan cleared up the dishes, then brought him to the living room while James explained the ring box contract.

“So, it’s an occasional commitment?”

“Well, I suggested we sell them a small batch of premade examples with local designs—fiddleheads, lighthouses, things that he thinks are likely to be popular. We’ll go from there.”

“Great,” Ryan agreed, nodding once. “I like the idea. Thanks for doing all that legwork on it.”

James smiled. “It’s my job,” he reminded Ryan. “So you want me to say yes?”

“Yep.”

“Our first real sale, then,” James told Ryan, grinning at the looks of surprise, then pleasure, that crossed Ryan’s face.

“I suppose it is. Cool.”

Ryan seemed reserved in general, so getting that kind of smile from him made James happy, too. “So! Let’s work out the letter of intent before we finish up, too.”

“Oh! Right. I was ready to go on just a handshake,” Ryan chuckled.

James glanced up at him, startled. “Really?”

“I know it’s stupid,” Ryan laughed. “But if I could, that’s the way I’d do things. I get why we should do this, though, don’t worry. Bring it on.”

Ryan always seemed willing to get going as soon as James nudged him, and James appreciated that. “Right,” he nodded, sliding a copy into Ryan’s hand.

They settled back to read and discuss it. In particular, the profit share, joint bank account access, and decision-making power were important to go over.

In essence, Ryan was the head of manufacturing, while James was the head of marketing. All decisions were to be made jointly when possible. The letter probably wasn’t finalized; they’d add to it as they realized what issues were likely to arise. For now, it was good enough.

That, plus a handshake after they signed.

Ryan’s palm was huge around his, but gentle, his smile genuinely warm. James’s worries slipped away, replaced by determination.

He wasn’t going to screw this up. Ryan had faith in him. In return, even though Ryan was said he was worried about competing with existing woodworkers, James reassured him. Based on what he’d seen of Ryan’s work already in the garage, he was confident.

Whatever happened, it was worth a shot, and he’d chosen a good business partner.

Now, if only he didn’t feel sparks crawling up his spine when Ryan’s hardened palm dragged across his own and they let go of their handshake.

Ryan

"It must suck not having a car." James made a face at him, those full lips drawing down into an expressive pout, and Ryan laughed. "Sorry."

"It *does* suck. So much. I can't wait until I get one," James chuckled. He looked out the window as they drove over the bridge toward the farmer's market.

Ryan had finished some small product every day that week since their letter of intent was signed. He was proud that they had a sample inventory now. That inventory was now in the backseat and trunk of his car, destined for the office of the market manager.

"Were you waiting for a job?"

"Yep. I was hoping to get one downtown so I can wait a year or so before I get one, but..." James blew out a sigh. "Transit is so shitty."

Ryan had never been on a bus here. He'd been lucky to get a car from his parents at sixteen, though he'd had to work part-time at a gas station to pay for all the associated costs. He'd seen the buses down by the mall, though. "I've heard," he sympathized.

"Going to university was the worst of it, though," James shrugged. "Now that I don't have to leave the house every day, it's not so bad. It's going to be annoying as the business grows, though."

That did bother Ryan. If he weren't certain James would turn it down, and if they had steady sales, he'd sneakily set him up with a business vehicle. For now, that was a no-go. "We'll work around it," he promised. "Now that I'm not doing overtime, I can drive us to more meetings, and I can actually be there on our behalf. Rather than making you run around doing it all," he chuckled.

"Right," James nodded, his brows drawing together.

Ryan wondered what was on his mind, but he wasn't sure he should ask. "If you're okay with that," he added after a minute, turning onto the side road.

"No, I'm fine." James cleared his throat and nodded. "The manager's

office is just around the side.”

“Great.” Ryan pulled up in the emptier section of the parking lot and climbed out. James headed to the back and waited for Ryan to unlock it. Then he gathered the smaller items—a mug stand, a carved box, and a cute *crazy cat lady* kitchen sign—into his arms.

James had persuaded Ryan to go with something safer than the signs they both wished they could sell. Straight people around here were their main market, so the *Mr. and Mr.* signs had to wait.

Ryan took the shelf under one arm and shoe rack under the other.

The manager had wanted to see samples of his work, so they were going to flood him with great-looking pieces.

Though he was clearly trying not to show it to Ryan, not wanting to psych him out, James was nervous as hell. He kept licking his lips and taking deep breaths.

James had coached Ryan several times on their elevator pitch. He was going to do just fine, but Ryan still didn’t blame him for being unnerved. This was a big opportunity to launch the business.

James balanced the box under his arm for a moment to ring the bell, then shifted the load around again.

The door opened a second later and the market manager—a tall guy named Angus—answered.

“Oh, hello again! James, wasn’t it?”

James had been here last weekend to check into the market, so it was a good sign that he remembered him. At least, Ryan hoped it was a good sign.

“Yes, that’s me! Hi. Angus, this is Ryan, my business partner and the mastermind behind the work.”

“Great to meet you, Ryan. Let me give you a hand there.”

Together, they carried the pieces over to the desk. Ryan did an inward jump for joy when he saw that he was already turning over the shoe rack in his hands with a skilled appraising eye. “Wow, the work on this is gorgeous.”

Ryan grinned. “Thanks,” he answered, setting down the other shelf and sitting in one of chairs he gestured them toward.

James sat next to him and scooted closer, his hands folded in his lap.



"I'm glad you came in to see me," Angus told them, leaning forward. "First, can I have a look at everything?"

"Go right ahead," James told him with a smile. "That's what we brought it for."

Angus looked at Ryan, who nodded his confirmation. He picked up the pieces and started examining them. Ryan's foot tapped nervously, but he didn't plan to say much.

"What kind of wood is this?" Angus asked Ryan.

"This one's cedar," James answered. He'd memorized the list of woods in these pieces the first time Ryan had explained them to him—which was impressive for a non-trade.

"Oh, cool." Angus was still watching Ryan for a second, and then he switched to the mug rack. "Where do your designs come from?"

"Mostly his own plans," James supplied again, leaning forward to explain. "Some we buy and modify, but he's got a lot of clever ideas."

"Yeah, I like what you did with this," Angus agreed, pointing to the curly fiddlehead tips on the mug rack rods. "Very local." He grinned at Ryan.

"Thanks," Ryan nodded.

Once Angus was done examining the sign, he glanced up at them. "Why pick these things to show me? Is this your typical product mix?"

"We're just getting started," James explained, "as you know, but yes. We chose them all carefully, to sell. Customers look for these kinds of products as Christmas gifts." James had explained this to Ryan—they had to sell the idea that they'd make the customers happier than the other guy. The market manager was most concerned with keeping customers happy. They didn't know who the other guy was or what he sold, or if there even *was* another guy competing for the stall. If there was, they had to make customers happier than he would.

"Good thinking." Angus looked down at the box, then up at Ryan again. "And this box is gorgeous. How long have you been creating woodwork crafts?"

James didn't answer this time, even though Ryan had told him when they developed the sales pitch—since high school. After a second, Ryan was the one to answer. "Since high school. I started off doing small pieces in woodworking class and then just... never stopped. I'm always tinkering. That started off as a ring box design, but my friend

turned it down, so I turned it into something bigger. More practical.”

“Great idea,” Angus agreed. “People have a fascination with boxes.”

“I think we’re all secretly cats,” James agreed, and that at least made Angus chuckle.

“So,” Angus said, looking back at Ryan with a slight frown. “So, I love your work, but I have some mixed news.”

*Oh, boy. I bet they don’t have any free space.* Ryan nodded and waited, trying not to hold his breath. He could feel James’s disappointment from beside him.

“When are you available to take a stall here?”

“We were hoping for one as soon as possible,” James spoke up.

“Right.” Angus looked at Ryan again.

It was then that Ryan realized this whole conversation had been Angus talking to him, not James, even though James was the business operations manager. Angus was friendly with him, even slapping his knee as he joked, smiling at him more as they chatted.

*Oh, shit.* The moment in the car had been real. *This is why James doesn’t want me coming along to all the meetings.*

Ryan had always been the biggest in his class. He’d never had the problem of not being respected because he looked young and cute. At least, Ryan hoped that was what going on. Hopefully it wasn’t something transphobic or homophobic. He didn’t get that feeling from the guy.

It was just the kind of man-to-man chat that James had probably always been excluded from.

“The thing is, we have another woodworker who approached us this morning. We’re about to sign him on. That’s our capacity,” Angus told Ryan. “Can you join a waiting list?”

Ryan’s gut clenched and he looked at James. “That’s for my boss to tell me.”

The hint was strongly worded enough that Angus glanced at James, back to Ryan, and then—at last—back at James. “Right. Do you think you can wait? We may get you in before Christmas when the market expands for the pre-Christmas weeks. It’s just not right away.”

James shot him a quick, grateful look, before he answered. “We can

wait. If we get a spot at another market, though, we'll have to chat."

"No, go right ahead, look for opportunities," Angus quickly agreed with James. "No hard feelings. I hope we can get you in, for what it's worth. I like your attitudes and your work."

Whoever had scuppered them, Ryan wasn't resentful. It was just a disappointing setback. There were people who started businesses all the time, and it was sheer bad luck for them he'd gotten there earlier in the day.

James's jaw was tight with disappointment, though. They made conversation, gathered up their inventory, and escaped the office.

Ryan waited until they were over the bridge again before speaking up. "Do you get that a lot?"

"Get wha—oh." James grimaced. "Yeah, a fair bit."

"Just because you look young and cute?"

James laughed quietly and gave him a grateful glance. "Well, I guess there's the upside."

Ryan grinned. "I never get *cute*."

"Oh, no. You'll have to live with *perfect masc*, then," James rolled his eyes.

Ryan snickered with laughter. "That sounds like a Grindr buzzphrase to me. I've been told that's a thing there. I have never had someone call me a perfect masc in real life, where it counts."

"I'm admitting nothing," James retorted, but he was grinning.

"I think you already did," Ryan teased. He chuckled when he saw James's cheeks go red. "You got any hot dates?"

"Maybe I do," James defended himself with a pout. "It's the new age, dude. We're allowed to date online."

Ryan laughed. "Good for you. If I were more motivated, I'd do the same." It sounded a bit weird to meet people on apps, but more power to James for it.

He noticed the flicker of jealousy that went through him at the possibility of James having a date with someone else.

What if, when he fidgeted with his phone, he was finding dates?

God, he *was* jealous. He should get on that. Find himself a date, too.

Before he started getting snarky with all his paired-up buddies.

James's house was one of those places that had been converted into apartments. When he dropped James off, Ryan realized he'd been smiling all morning. Even this much socialization was good for him. Maybe James had the right idea.

He waited until he got into his driveway before he sent the text.

*Wanna help me get set up on that site sometime?*

A minute later, he had his response from James.

*Of course! we'll get your lame ass on dates too ;)*

Ryan laughed and pocketed his phone, unlocking his front door. He was glad that James was comfortable enough to banter back now.

## James

James couldn't pretend, even to himself, that he wasn't jealous.

Would he help his friend set up a Grindr profile? Ryan wasn't great with technology. He probably didn't even have location services enabled. Of course he'd help. But he didn't have to like it.

He slammed the fridge closed for the fourth time in the last hour.

James wasn't heading over just to talk about Grindr profiles with Ryan. Too long a walk for that. He'd just heard back from both craft fairs coming up soon. One next weekend had a last-minute stall available, and the other had one a week later.

It was time to get serious.

It had been a few days since their unsuccessful farmer's market meeting. These last couple of weeks had been dawn-'till-dusk work days—the kind he hadn't realized he missed so much. The shitty work environment at the store had overshadowed the perks. James genuinely enjoyed talking to people and getting out of the house.

Again, James looked around his fridge for something to satisfy him before he walked over to Ryan's house. He wasn't sure what exactly he felt like eating.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he remembered a lecture he'd once attended at school. The lecturer, a fourth-year student, had talked to the incoming class about staying healthy.

*"The human body has primal needs—food, water, the bathroom, sleep, and yeah, sex. But the body doesn't always know which is which. Sometimes you feel hungry but you have water and you realize you were just thirsty? It's that principle. If nothing's hitting the spot, take a step back and check everything else."*

It had proven true more times than he could count. Even when the depression was so thick he could barely see out of it, sometimes there was an extra layer of grey he didn't realize until it was gone. Usually after he'd eaten, or had a glass of water, or some stupid little thing like that.

James had the sneaking suspicion he knew which of those list was bothering him lately.

He had to get going, though, if he was going to have time to see Ryan before rock climbing tonight. He climbed at an indoor gym that was part of his old university.

Even though he'd graduated, community members could register for memberships and climb there anytime. Without a regular partner, he was limited to climbing when the group did, every week. Sometimes friends joined him, but nobody loved it as much as him.

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“You do what?”

James laughed at the look Ryan gave his arms. “Yeah, I can climb walls. I’m stronger than I look,” he complained. He elbowed Ryan as they walked between his house and his workshop.

“I’m sure! I wondered how you got so toned,” Ryan grinned.

James yanked his attention quickly off the comment. Ryan noticing his slowly-honed core strength didn’t mean Ryan *wanted* him. God knew he knew that much by now. “It’s amazing what it does for you. You find muscles you didn’t know existed.”

Ryan laughed. “It’s kind of equal-opportunity, isn’t it? The bigger and heavier you are, the harder it is for you...”

“Exactly,” James nodded. “It’s bodyweight training, but on a vertical surface.”

Ryan looked thoughtful. “Genius. Is there any kind of open night?”

“Every week! You wanna come tonight?” James followed Ryan into his workshop, flipping his binder open to the inventory page. “To the gym?” he quickly added... just in case.

He was definitely imagining Ryan’s blush in the weird, sterile workshop overhead light. Ryan nodded. “I’d love to. Okay, here’s what I’ve been working on...”

They had an easy, comfortable rhythm now as friends and business partners. They always whipped through the list of to-dos, should-dos, and have-dones in no time. Now, they had a target to work toward—the craft show next weekend. They were both laser-focused.

“Oh,” Ryan spoke up, glancing at him. “I found out who the other

woodworking business was. My least—my coworker.”

Had quiet, steadfast Ryan been about to admit that he didn’t like someone? James’s lips twitched, but he didn’t call him out on it. “Oh, really?”

“Yeah. He didn’t even tell me himself—Tan, my boss, told me.”

James hummed under his breath. He couldn’t comment much, but he frowned. “That sounds shitty.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Ryan shrugged it off. “Being free of that means we can do these craft fair things. Speaking of which, you wanted to show me the setup?”

“Oh! Yes. Our table’s a six-foot one, do you have anything like that for us to set up?”

James didn’t have all the decorations yet, but he explained what he was thinking: using larger items to elevate smaller items and create a visually interesting display; an email list signup form; and a credit card processing sign near the front of the table.

James could almost see Ryan’s eyes glazing over, however the carpenter tried to hide it. He bit back his laugh.

“If you’re fine with all that, I’ll go ahead and buy it and we’ll do a trial setup tomorrow night, here. If you’re free.”

“Of course I’m free,” Ryan snorted. “I’m not the top Grindr pick of the week.”

“There’s not even—there’s not a leaderboard,” James retorted, but he laughed. It wasn’t *that* unusual for guys not to have used it, but most at least knew how it worked. “Oh, Scruff has one...”

“I don’t even know what that is,” Ryan admitted, looking embarrassed as he laughed. “God, I’m lame.”

“No,” James assured him and clapped his shoulder. The thick muscles under his hand were warm and firm, and... he didn’t want to let go, so he didn’t just yet. “You just have self-respect.”

Behind Ryan’s sweet brown eyes, concern rippled as his brows pinched. He didn’t say anything, which was typical for him, but...

“It’s a joke,” James grinned.

Then, Ryan relaxed enough to chuckle. “Okay.”

James appreciated that Ryan was worried enough about him to notice

that comment instead of just laughing it off immediately, though. How sweet.

“But if there *were* a leaderboard, would you be on the top?” Ryan grinned. That mischievous look was back in his eye.

James broke out laughing, staring at his new friend and letting go of his arm to fold his own arms, tilting his head. He didn’t care how camp he looked doing it. “Are you asking if I get around?”

“No!” Ryan looked mortified now, his eyes widening as he raised his palms. “I meant, I bet you’re popular, because you’re cute. If you don’t mind my saying so. And I wouldn’t judge—”

James laughed even harder now. Ryan teased him so easily, but he took him seriously in return. “*Joking*,” he reminded Ryan, elbowing him before he clapped his back. “Come on, we should go climbing before you lose your shit.” He didn’t want to answer that question, but not because he was shy. It could just be a downer to get into the finer details of his interactions on that damn app.

Ryan thought he was *cute*. James didn’t hate the word, but he didn’t prefer it. But Ryan could get away with calling him that.

It looked like Ryan was relieved to get the chance to escape. He strode for the workshop door, but held it for James behind him.



Ryan

“Don’t bother. You’ll have a bulge no matter what you do.”

Ryan’s cheeks heated up as James murmured to him behind his shoulder. He’d been standing behind him and no doubt noticing the way he tugged his climbing harness this way and that.

“I wasn’t—”

“Mmm.” For his part, James didn’t seem shy. The straps circled his crotch, showing the distinctive bulging outline in his pants.

Noticing that made it hard for Ryan to focus. He tightened the straps around his own legs, double-checking all the buckles and straps. The whole time, he tried to ignore his own package and the way James was restraining his laughter.

“I see why you like this sport,” Ryan grumbled teasingly.

James wasn’t perving on anyone else, though. He had ignored the other young, cute guys here since they’d arrived. After taking Ryan to the counter to get shoes and a harness, he’d shown him how to assemble the harness.

“Now check these.” James hooked his thumb in the straps around Ryan’s legs, pulling him closer.

Oh, shit, that was hot.

Ryan caught his breath. James’s strength alone wasn’t enough to budge him, but he was almost surprised enough to stumble. Which brought him to his other concern: the nimble fingers tugging at the straps around his crotch. He had nowhere to hide any possible... reactions.

“Um, so, we hold each other down? Or... up?” Ryan blushed at his own ignorance; he’d never thought twice about rock-climbing. It hadn’t been a sporting option while growing up, and nobody else he knew did it.

Sure, Cam had once played hockey, and he’d mentioned wall-climbing now and then in cross-training. Chase fenced and dared anyone to tell

him that wasn't a sport. Thomas and Alex skied together. Floyd and Greyson ran and worked out in the gym. Kevin and Matty were pro hockey players. That left Ryan and Jackson as just about the only two who didn't play sports, and even Jackson could be persuaded to join a pickup ball game in the summer.

It wasn't because Ryan was afraid of physical activity. He'd played football and soccer growing up, but never seriously. Nothing else had caught his attention. He didn't have the same competitive drive as many of his friends.

"Something like that," James grinned. "It's a counterbalance system."

That instantly made sense to Ryan. They used similar to lift loads of lumber by hand to upper stories sometimes, while framing a house. Machines were preferred these days. He was used to working in a harness when safety regulations called for it, too.

But here, it was different. There were no neat ladders to climb up.

Ryan stared doubtfully up the wall of flimsy-looking rubber handholds. He didn't see anyone else who looked a similar size and weight to him around right now.

"You'll be fine," James reassured him, and then a shiver ran down Ryan's spine. James's hand was resting on his back, his thumb rubbing a slow circle or two between his shoulder blades.

Ryan cast him an appreciative look, licking his lips subconsciously.

"But I can belay you—"

"What now?" Ryan knew exactly what James meant, but he wanted to see if he'd blush.

It was so easy to make James turn red. There he went again, those bright eyes lighting up in embarrassment. "You... I can't take you anywhere."

"Nope," Ryan agreed, then fell quiet to let James talk.

"I can belay you. The rope system makes it work."

"Yeah, I get it now. I've done it with supplies at work, just not... other guys," Ryan chuckled. He rolled his shoulders to limber up. "Am I climbing or belaying first?"

"I'll get you to climb first so you know what that side's like. I think it's better to climb, then belay," James told him matter-of-factly. He sounded like he'd taught this before.

Just another bit of expertise that made Ryan find him fascinating.

“Yes, sir,” Ryan teased. “You’re the boss.”

“You don’t seem to mind.” Was that James flirting? The way he sauntered alongside of Ryan, leading him to the wall, made Ryan think so.

Ryan smirked. “As long as you do a good job of it.”

“You’ll see. Step forward.”

Ryan obeyed, and James clipped and tied him in, showing him how the system worked. It was exactly what he’d expected, down to the figure-eight knot. There was a clever grigri with assisted braking in case of sudden falls.

“I actually hate these,” James confided under his breath. “But they’re safer for beginners, because it’s harder to fuck them up.”

Ryan’s nerves were kicking in now. An unconscious shiver coursed through him when he looked at the wall. It stretched above him a good two stories or so, almost all the way up to the ceiling.

He’d been up on support beams and scabbled across roofs, but that was a known environment. It was easier to get up and down. Here, he’d have to scabble his way up, fighting for toeholds and handholds every step of the way.

“A little adrenaline’s good,” James told him. Ryan cast him another grateful look. “Keeps you on your toes. This one’s an easy route though. Take it slow, think about what you want to do before you do it. You’re not gonna fall far. I’ll keep the tension tight to make sure of that.”

Ryan blew out a breath and nodded firmly. He wanted to impress James... and he didn’t want to think about why that was.

He stepped toward the wall as James stepped back, reaching up for the highest handhold he could grab. His foot naturally found a rubber spot. He dug his toes in, ignoring the pinch from the special shoes that pressed them together. After he grabbed the second handhold, he tensed his body and pushed up. His foot found a hold as high as he could make it go, leaving him crouched against the wall.

Almost instantly, the rope was tight—if he’d let go, he would have been swinging a couple of inches off the ground.

Some of the adrenaline faded as he took a look up, focusing only on the next couple of grips.

Once he was in motion, it was way easier to keep going than stop and think about it. He tried to keep moving steadily, letting no more than a few seconds pass each time before choosing the next handhold or toehold.

Everything else faded: the noise of the gym around them, the faint music in the background, the calls of belayers to their climbers from nearby...

James's voice and the wall were all that was left. He saw Ryan looking for that next handhold—the one that looked just a *bit* too far away, but maybe he could manage it...

"You going for it? Tension?" His warm, rough voice filtered up through the fog of unimportant information. Ryan nodded broadly so the motion could be seen from below.

"Tension," Ryan confirmed, raising his voice.

The rope tightened, and he tensed his whole body before launching up for the next handhold.

He made it, the adrenaline flooding to the very tips of his fingers and toes. He flattened against the wall. The grip was barely strong enough to keep him up there, but he had it.

He heard a cheer, and that was unmistakably James's. And a couple of other voices, too.

Oh, shit, other people were watching.

He brushed that off and ignored them, waiting a second before he chose his next awkward toehold. He was scrabbling up the wall, more like a crab than the graceful climbers he spotted in his peripheral vision.

It occurred to Ryan when he looked up and saw about six feet to go that James had his life in his hands, and he didn't mind. James was cautious and methodical, thorough in everything he did. Why wouldn't he be thorough with Ryan's safety?

Ryan could feel how closely James was watching him—how quickly he responded whenever he called down for more or less tension.

Just a few feet to go. So close he could *almost* reach out and grab it. Jesus, that meant he was...

He looked down.

Though he was used to working on roofs, it was different to look

straight down and see only the even-smaller figure of James. The rope was threaded along his front and above him, then down behind him, so he didn't even see the rope.

"Deep breaths," he heard James call out.

Ryan jerked his head in a quick nod, the adrenaline seizing up his muscles for a second. A few deep breaths, in and out for the count of four, helped release them. Then, he forced his gaze up instead, to the last few handholds.

The orange one. He could make that one.

Some fear-based response snaked through his nerves at the idea, but he pushed past it and lunged for it.

He missed, his fingers scraping the wall as his feet were jolted loose.

"Damn it. Grab on. Try again!"

He wasn't giving up now. James was right. James's coaching had gotten him this far, and it wouldn't fail him now.

Ryan found his toe holds again, then his hand holds, and made another lunge. He made it this time, every muscle in his back clenching to haul himself up until his feet could find a perch.

From there, it was easy to wrap his fingers around the top edge of the wall. Tension and anticipation flooded out of his body, replaced with triumphant joy.

Holy shit. He'd just climbed a wall with nothing more than his fingers and toes. It was the kind of accomplishment that felt strange even as he reveled in it—totally nerdy, and totally cool.

James's whoop of joy was unmistakable, and it made him break out laughing.

There were a few other cheers and claps from nearby; James's friends had been watching his last few moves, too.

"Let go!" someone called out. The face Ryan made must have been easy to see even from down there, because there was answering laughter. "No, seriously."

Ryan looked down at James, glad his adrenaline didn't spike this time, and James nodded. The rope was tight and secure in James's hands.

*Okay, then.*

Ryan slowly let go of his hand holds, then his foot holds, however

wrong it felt to do so.

“Lean back. Like you’re sitting on the sofa.”

That was an even weirder instruction. But when James told him to do something and he was dangling thirty feet off the ground, Ryan did it.

It was almost like flying, if not for the strain against his legs and thighs from the straps of his harness. He caught his breath when the rope jolted, then started to shudder. The wall rose beside him.

Twice more, James had to remind him to sit back. He kept wanting to grab the wall to keep himself from hitting it, even though he knew the proper procedure. It was an instinct strong enough that fighting it took almost all his attention. The ground startled him with how close it was when he next looked.

A couple more feet and Ryan’s feet were touching the ground, the rope going slack. He found his footing again and almost stumbled immediately.

James yanked a few more feet of slack free from the harness so he could haul Ryan in for a tight hug.

Oh, boy—especially after his adrenaline rush, the warm, smaller body tucked against his felt good. Arms snaked around his waist as James praised him.

He squeezed James in his own hug, a laugh slipping free. “That was fun.”

James broke out laughing, along with a few others nearby.

*Right. Shit. We’re in public.*

For a second, consumed by James and his help achieving this cool feat, Ryan had almost forgotten. He’d almost wanted to sweep him off his feet.

Ryan’s cheeks heated up as he stepped back from James, suddenly aware of the bulge pressed into his leg. James’s cock, framed by straps the same way his own was.

Had he felt that, too? Was it...?

*Oh, shit, no*, he scolded himself. The only reason he’d need to know whether that was stiffened skin or silicone was if he was interested.

And he wasn’t. Well, more precisely, couldn’t be. No, not even that. *Shouldn’t* be.

In his moment of flustered embarrassment, trying to think his way out of that, he almost missed James's hands. He only felt them when they were on his crotch, unfastening the figure-eight knot.

Looking down his body at James's hands working around his crotch did *not* help his current train of thought. He couldn't indulge it for any longer if he wanted to not embarrass them both in public.

"I got it," he told James. He was strangely disappointed when James listened, and his hands went to his own harness instead to slip the rope free.

Then, the positions were reversed—but James waited to get hooked in himself until Ryan was set up.

"Right. I'm gonna have a friend here to watch you belay me, but the basics are simple. I like a tight belay, so don't worry about that."

*That's awfully distracting, too. Nope, don't.*

Ryan paid the closest attention he could as he learned the familiar safety principles: always have at least one hand on the rope; never point his thumb that way; when taking up the slack, always have both hands on the rope; keep it angled down as much as possible.

It was different when it was James's weight on the line than a load of gear.

"Ready?" James asked him.

James's friend, Ash, was at their elbow, studying his technique. James hung onto the wall, about to take his first step.

"Ready."

It was instinctual to want to take up the slack the moment he felt any. He worked quickly to haul the rope through the harness, his eyes settling on James's lithe body splayed out across the wall.

Oh, that was hot.

Ryan was a good multitasker. He kept the part of his brain that was focused on the sexual appeal of a man in tight clothes and an even tighter harness stretched out on the wall in front of him separate from the part that wanted to keep him safe.

Most distractingly of all, the leg straps pulled the fabric of James's trousers tight around his thighs. Ryan had a great view of his ass.

He understood why James had been smirking when he hit the ground.

Ryan tried not to stare at it, but he had no choice if he wanted to anticipate his moves. It was easy to follow James's progress as long as he paid close attention. He must have been enough of a natural at belaying that Ash, near him, didn't offer many instructions.

Really, as long as he remembered to keep the rope down, it was easy.

"Oof—fuck," James hissed from about ten feet up. He'd lunged for a handhold, missed, and banged his knee against a foothold.

Ryan winced in sympathy and watched closely. He saw the next most obvious move a second before James did. He was ready by the time James scrambled to put his foot on the spot where he'd just bashed his knee. Then, James lunged again.

He took the slack in fast, barely feeling James's weight on the line. It made it almost tricky to belay him, because he didn't have much to tug against.

"Th-Thanks," James panted, grinning over his shoulder after he took a moment to catch his breath. "Nice. You're sharp."

The praise made Ryan grin back at him. "Welcome. Just about ready?"

"Just about."

Ash had started smirking into his Gatorade bottle as he looked back and forth between Ryan's hands and James's position. Not in a mean way, but in the kind of way that definitely meant he was making the wrong assumptions.

He couldn't stop looking at James's sexy little ass, since he had no other view at all by this point. Ash could deal with a little sexual tension.

James made it to the top in half the time Ryan had. Then, Ash stepped closer to explain the *other* end of what he'd just experienced. "When he leans back, it protects his head from banging the wall if the rope slips. So you lift the rope like that—yes, exactly. And gently guide it through. Keep a hold on that, be ready to yank it down if it slips... exactly."

His hands were toughened from his line of work. He barely felt the rope burn as the cord slid through his palms and James lowered in front of him.

When James hit the ground, he sprang up to his feet and beamed. "Nice! Thanks, Ash."

"Hey, I think *I'm* supposed to congratulate *you*!" Ryan laughed,



hauling more slack free. “Thanks,” he added to James’s friend as he walked off—clearly to give them a moment.

This time, when James leaned in, the hug wasn’t impulsive and joyful. It was slow and deliberate and...

Hot.

Ryan swallowed hard, letting go of James after a second or two and stepping back. The part of him that wanted to pull James in and run his hands down his back to that tight little ass and kiss him...

“Phew. You want to climb again?” Ryan asked.

“Nah, I’m not feeling like it tonight,” James told him, his voice low. “And you just learned a lot. Do you?”

“No, once was enough for me,” Ryan admitted with a laugh. “I can give you a ride home.”

James smiled. “Thanks. I’d appreciate it.”

“Of course.”

They were quiet as they climbed out of their gear and shoes, back into their normal clothes. Ryan tried not to notice his disappointment when the toned arms and the slender, muscled physique of his partner disappeared again under his sweater.

He was shivering.

After James said his goodbyes and Ryan politely nodded at everyone, they headed out to the car and Ryan glanced at him. “Cold?”

“A little,” James admitted, his cheeks reddened by the cold. “They try to heat that place, but it doesn’t always work. Especially in the winter.”

It had felt warm enough to Ryan. He chuckled. “You do have poor circulation.”

“Rude,” James clicked his tongue with a waggle of his head, which made Ryan laugh. “Yeah, I do, though. You should have seen me pre-T.”

Ryan grinned. “Yeah? It got better?”

“Dude, I was always in three layers before that. Now I can manage in two,” James rolled his eyes, and Ryan laughed again. “You don’t know how lucky you have it, you guys who are space heaters.”

“You just need to find a big spoon.”

Ryan’s cheeks flushed the moment he said it. Would James take it as an invitation? Fuck, had he *meant* it as one? He was awfully tempted by the idea of wrapping his body around James’s, pulling him in against his front. That would leave his hands free for an awful lot of exploration.

Shit, that was totally inappropriate.

James snickered. “I will. If you need a moment there, just tell me.”

Ryan’s body was flushed with heat, and oh yeah, that was a semi Ryan was trying to will away. Ryan shoved James, but James just snickered, his eyes bright with mischief. Ryan knew now what James felt like when he teased him.

“You’re... Jesus, anyone ever tell you you’re a handful?” Ryan retorted, adjusting himself. That would settle down. It was just adrenaline, plus innuendo and imagination. “Sorry,” he added in the obligatory mumble as he headed around to the driver’s side.

James’s eyes glinted. “Oh, plenty of guys get them at the gym. No big.”

By the time they climbed into the car, Ryan was ready to pretend that moment hadn’t happened. James was being gracious enough to give him the chance to forget.

There *was* something still bugging him, though, but he wasn’t going to ask.

“I don’t have that problem, but I’ve got a few others,” James added, buckling up. Those bright eyes were fixed on him, that cute smile playing at his lips as his face tilted up toward Ryan’s.

*Oh, shit, he’s not gonna give me any space here.* Ryan’s hand nearly found James’s instead of the parking brake. He caught himself just in time and squeezed the button extra-hard. *Keep it together.*

“Yeah?” Ryan asked casually, letting him say what he wanted to say.

James chuckled. “I saw you looking. It’s not biological yet. Or maybe ever—I don’t like all the options we’ve got, and there’s not many options yet.”

“Ahh. So you don’t feel...?”

“Nope. Well, a bit of a phantom feeling, if you know what I mean,” James told him. Ryan once again admired his simple openness. How

many times had he answered these questions with the same good humor?

Or was he answering them because it was Ryan asking?

That was presuming way too much about what James wanted, surely? When James's eyes fell to his lips for a second, Ryan suspected maybe he was right, though.

"Ohhh. Yeah, I can imagine."

James nodded. "I don't always wear it. It helps in the bathroom. And when I top for the right guy, obviously... A lot of us will say *assembly required*, like IKEA."

Ryan was blushing, but he nodded, determined to let James talk. He clearly was comfortable with him as a friend, at least, and Ryan had to make it not-weird, right?

God, Ryan wasn't hard right now, but it had only barely faded. He could get... *inspired*... a little too fast. He wanted to roll down the window for cool air, but James would get cold.

"Right. So it gets... hard...?" Ryan trailed off.

"With a rod," James's eyes twinkled. "Which I did *not* put in, because otherwise it'll look like a boner with a harness on. And I don't know if we're at that stage of friendship yet."

He was flirting. A breathy laugh escaped Ryan as he grinned at James, pulling to a stop at the light. He had the chance to look over for a second at the high cheekbones and long lashes. A wicked smirk played on James's lips...

James knew exactly what he was doing.

Okay. Fine. Two could play the *flirting friends* game. Ryan's tongue flickered along his lower lip as he watched James. He said, "You're lucky. You get to choose your boners."

"Oh, not always," James grinned. "It's just not as obvious."

That got Ryan's imagination working again as he nodded at James.

*Shit. I'm really into this guy.*

Ryan missed the light turning green for the first few seconds. When James laughed and pointed ahead, he let go of the brake to start driving again. He'd only been there now and then to go over numbers in the last couple of weeks—James usually came to his place. "Just

down this way, right?”

“Yep,” James cheerily answered. “You’re polite about it, you know.”

Ryan wasn’t sure how to take it. “Thanks? I don’t wanna be a dick. I looked stuff up—” *Chest binder. God. Embarrassment.* “—but if I ever fuck up...”

“I’ll tell you,” James promised, laughing again. “Just down at the end, this house here.”

Ryan’s stomach dropped with disappointment, but then, a second later...

“If you wanted me to help you with the Grindr thing, by the way... or just have some tea for the road, if you’re interested?” James offered.

Ryan hadn’t been this interested in a long time, but he tried to play it cool. “You don’t mind? Sure. I’d like that.”

“Course I don’t mind. I invited you, duh,” James grumbled. “Park anywhere along here.”

Once he did, James climbed out first to lead him to the house.

Ryan locked up the car behind him, the cool air bringing him back to his senses. He couldn’t let himself get *totally* carried away.

They chatted about James’s place—pointless chit-chat, of course—as they got their shoes and jackets off. James went to the kitchen side of the bachelor apartment to put the kettle on, and Ryan followed. That melted the tension, at least—until the moment James turned around again, leaning back against the counter. He was just a foot or two away from where Ryan leaned.

He could almost feel the heat from James’s body. James’s tongue darted along his lower lip.

James’s voice was low but steady. “Do you want to kiss me?”

Ryan didn’t know where the impulse had come from, but *fuck*, yes. He jerked his head in a quick nod. “D’you?”

James pushed himself away from the counter and toward Ryan, turning as he did. James stretched up onto his toes. One delicate hand settled on Ryan’s shoulder, then trailed down his back. The other pulled him down into the kiss.

It was slow, hot, tentative...

And Ryan’s barely-dormant interest was stirring awake again, his cock

hardening and heart thumping. James's full lips slowly worked against his, their breathing sharp through their noses. James's stubble scraped Ryan's hand when Ryan cupped his cheek...

Then, James's body pressed against his, and Ryan instinctively pulled him in harder.

Oh, Jesus.

Business partners and friends with benefits? This wouldn't end well. For once in his carefully-planned and practical life, Ryan didn't care.

James

Thank God he'd asked the question. Ryan was so sweet and careful to make sure he wasn't being weird or intrusive.

But it wasn't hard to read the way Ryan couldn't tear his eyes off him. Or the way he turned red and fidgeted with his jeans pocket when James told him how his packer worked. Or the way he was drawn magnetically close, leaning right next to him in the kitchen.

So he'd asked, flat-out, whether this gorgeous hunk wanted to kiss him. Apparently, the answer was *yes*, and that was all James needed.

James pressed into Ryan, trying not to let the heat get turned up too fast. *You can kiss a guy without going straight to sucking his dick*, he reminded himself, his heart pounding.

Their lips slid together, warm and wet and all tongues and teeth and lips; they were sucking, pressing, sliding...

He wasn't used to guys wanting to take it slow. Nobody wanted to join Grindr for clothed fun. Part of him felt like he *should* push this faster, show Ryan that he could still please him.

For now, he relaxed into the kiss, pressing his lips against Ryan's. They were the only part of him he'd gotten to touch so far that was soft.

Nope, now he'd found another. Ryan had a *great* ass. When James's hands ran down over it to pull him close and sidle up against him, the softest grunt slipped from Ryan's throat.

God. Did he know how hot he was? He had to. He was a good six inches taller than James, the kind of height guys wanted. He was broad-shouldered and muscled in the *pick you up and throw you against the mattress* way guys craved. And his face was radiant, his lips full, his jaw scruffy and stubbly...

He could be a fuckin' model, and he was here working as a carpenter in stupid Fredericton.

The comparison had begun, then. Already, James didn't feel like enough to catch his interest. But as Ryan pulled back from the kiss but

kept his arms looped around his waist, hands flat on his back, James thought he *could* be.

“Jesus, you’re a good kisser,” Ryan murmured.

James smirked with pleasure, leaning up to press another kiss against Ryan’s jaw. “So are you.” With Ryan’s back to the counter, he had him pinned there with his own smaller body. Neither of them were flinching back.

The chemistry between them was clear as day. Ryan’s hand kept twitching toward his ass and thigh. He *so* wanted to be given permission to touch.

“I didn’t think you were into me,” Ryan breathed out after a second.

James winked. “If me staring at your ass for half an hour wasn’t enough of a clue...”

“I was busy climbing a wall!”

“I was climbing the walls by the time you noticed, too.” James winked, pleased when Ryan laughed. “So, now that we’ve gone and done this... may I remind us both how stupid it is?”

Ryan’s hand ran up his back, eliminating any hope he had of protesting it. That broad hand running along his spine, cupping the back of his neck, then tangling in his hair? Oh, God, yes, he wanted more of that.

Ryan was saying something.

“Mmm?” James murmured, and Ryan laughed, repeating himself.

“That didn’t stop us from this much.”

“Not my fault you’re so kissable,” James informed Ryan with an airy shrug. “Or that I am.” Ryan looked surprised, but laughed. “What? I am.”

“Y-Yeah. You are.” Ryan’s tone of voice and nod were emphatic. He stared across the kitchen like he was composing himself.

James beamed. The compliment was so accepted. “Thanks.”

The kettle clicked off and James let out a quick rush of breath. He slowly stepped back from Ryan’s hold to give them both a second and some space. He quietly poured cups of tea.

It felt like the morning after, just seconds later.

Ryan barely met his eyes as he accepted the cup of tea. For a second, James started to worry. Then Ryan looked up again, almost through his lashes, and it occurred to him—he was *shy*.

Shit, a guy his size shy? And he'd thought Ryan couldn't get any more adorable... or fun to tease.

James beamed as he sipped his tea. "I left room for cream," he murmured, letting innuendo slide through his tone.

Ryan choked and stared into his mug of black tea, eyes wide as he stifled his cough. It was obvious he didn't know how to handle a mouthy little bastard like James prided himself on being. "Cream, please."

Fuck that. James wasn't going to play damsel and wait for a big, strong, masc dude to sweep him off his feet. Ryan could try to keep up with him.

James flicked his fingers, his wrist limp, toward the fridge. "Soy cream in the fridge—"

"Yep," Ryan said quickly and moved over there, pouring some into his tea and stirring it.

James wanted to see what he did next. He wasn't disappointed—Ryan walked right back toward him, leaning right there again.

*He still wants more.* A shiver crawled down James's spine at the thought of all the things he wanted to do to Ryan—wanted Ryan to do to him. He very much agreed with the sentiment.

The sexual chemistry between them didn't abate for a second as they both sipped their cups of tea. Then, James leaned in and put down his mug, pressing a kiss below Ryan's ear. "You can kiss me like that again, you know."

Ryan slid his mug over the counter, not needing to be told twice.

Strong hands gripped his shoulders, turning him until he was back-on to the counter. That ripped body pressed him up against it, his biceps just right there as a hand ran up through his hair. The other hand ran down over his front toward his belt.

Best of all, Ryan's lips covered his, his breathing quick and ragged. James ran his hand up Ryan's thighs. Ryan's breathing hitched when his palm ran over the bulge in his pants. He was unmistakably hard.

No surprise, after the gym and a car ride of teasing, and now kissing like porn stars.



James pushed past the moment of aching envy that he couldn't subtly push his own hardness directly into Ryan's thigh right now. It was sheltered under a layer of soft silicone.

The only sounds in the kitchen were rough breathing and rustles and smacks. Their breathing hitched together with each slow suck of lips on lips. Hands rustled on clothing as those hands *finally* ran down his thighs, then up his arms, feeling him up. Best of all, the wet smacks of lips on lips mingled with their rough breaths.

"I... *really* better get going, if this is a stupid idea," Ryan breathed out after a second. He was peeling his body away from James's. "But I don't think I'll need that Grindr profile, you know?"

James resisted the urge to press into that hard plane of masculinity in front of him and climb it like a tree. His chest heaved for breath. He hadn't been kissed like that in fucking *months*. As far as he was concerned, Ryan could do whatever the fuck he wanted to him now.

But he was trying to respect him, and James tried to remember that shouldn't be disappointing. Even better—he didn't want to hook up. Had that been some clumsy attempt to get closer?

"Yeah," James whispered after a second, then offered Ryan a cheeky grin. "It *would* be even more stupid if you stayed. Business partners."

"Business partners," Ryan agreed, clearing his throat and straightening up as James did, too. "That—that list of things to build..."

"Already emailed you," James told him, trying not to think about that broad hand running up his spine to cup the back of his neck. His shivers were gone, though, very much replaced by the heat of arousal still roasting him.

As James walked Ryan to the door, talking chitchat about their business for the next week before that craft fair, it was the elephant in the room.

There was no way they could pretend this hadn't happened.

His shoes and jacket on, Ryan's eyes fell to James's lips for a long second when he opened the front door. Then he seemed to push past whatever thought had stopped him, swooping down to peck him on the lips.

"Night!" James grinned.

"Night." Ryan almost fled down the porch toward the car while James leaned in the doorway, grinning until his face hurt.

For a guy his size, Ryan could move nimbly when embarrassed.

Or when he wanted to pin him to the counter and kiss him like his life depended on it. Oh, James was gonna jack off to the memory of that one hot, *hot* fucking kiss for weeks.

Ryan

“Wait, you just said you *kissed* him?”

“Fuck,” Ryan groaned at the disbelieving, thrilled voice that came down the line. “Yes. Please don’t tell the others.”

Kevin laughed. “Dude. You know Cam texted me to say you’re married to your phone?”

“He did?” Ryan was gonna slap him upside the head.

Kevin laughed. “God, I wish I could be there to see your lovey eyes.”

“I do not have—now you’re just making shit up.”

“Maybe,” Kevin snickered. “So, you’re calling for advice? Why?”

“God knows. It seemed like a good idea five minutes ago,” Ryan grumbled, both of them laughing. “Just confirmation that it’s stupid, I guess.”

“It *is* stupid, mixing business and pleasure, but plenty of people do it. Married couples run businesses.”

Ryan’s cheeks flushed with heat as he turned on his heel, pacing the other way through his workshop. “That’s different.”

“Mm. It is,” Kevin acknowledged, his voice more serious now. “I get the whole *coworkers, can’t do this* thing,” he assured Ryan. After all, he was quietly dating another pro hockey player. That was a pretty big taboo to break in Canadian sports culture. “But seriously, that just means you *get* each other, too. I mean, you’ve worked with plenty of other guys on the job, right? It’s not just proximity.”

“It’s not,” Ryan agreed. He’d been captivated by James from across the room, before they’d even spoken. There had just been a spark. He couldn’t say *that*, though. Kevin would make fun of him. “He’s not in a stable position right now, though. We need to get income coming in. That’s more important for him right now—stability.”

“Very mature,” Kevin praised him, and he was only half-teasing. “So, when does that happen?”

“We’ve got a stall at the fair the day after tomorrow. Saturday.”

“And have you seen him since the kiss?”

“No,” Ryan groaned. To be fair, he’d been absorbed in work. He’d had long days on the job before coming home to finish the inventory pieces James had instructed him to make. “He’s coming over today to help finish stuff that’s already built. Paint and sanding, that kind of work.”

“Ahhh. And you’re worried about that awkward moment,” Kevin filled in. “Just push through it, man. If he’s stressed about this, too, he won’t wanna waste time, either.”

“Right,” Ryan agreed. “Get through this show first and then see where we’re at.”

“This is the first real market test,” Kevin agreed. “You know, Floyd or Jackson would be able to help more with that.”

“No, I’m confident that what he said about the market is right,” Ryan told Kevin. “He knows his shit, business-wise.”

“I meant for moral support. Being a business owner is stressful. Like being a freelancer. A lot of us technically are.”

Ryan had learned more than he’d ever thought he’d know about pro hockey since Kevin moved to Toronto. “Oh. Yeah, we’re having a barbecue with everyone on Sunday, after the show.”

“With James there?”

“Yeah. Oh, shit, I haven’t invited him.”

Kevin laughed. “Well done,” he teased. “Invite him tonight, and then just focus on the show. And, man?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad you told me. Seriously, man, I haven’t heard you talk so much in ages. He’s good for you to be around, in whatever way. Don’t keep him a secret.”

“I won’t,” Ryan promised. “Like you did with Matty—”

“That was different,” Kevin hotly retorted, and Ryan laughed.

“Right. Of course,” Ryan smirked. “But I’m not telling everyone what’s going on until *I* know.”

“Smart,” Kevin told him. “Give him some space to figure things out,

too, huh?"

Ryan nodded to himself, then remembered Kevin couldn't see. "Yep."

"Awesome. Let me know how it goes, then, huh?"

"I will," Ryan promised. "Thanks. Good luck with the media training!"

"Anytime. Catch you later."

Ryan let out a breath, his heart thumping with nerves. Any minute now, James would be here. Suddenly Ryan was worried about how he looked in his work clothes—torn jeans, sawdust-covered plaid shirt, wood stain streaked along his clothes...

But it was too late to worry about that, because that was definitely a knock he'd just heard on the door. "Come in!"

James poked his head in, then grinned. "Whoa, someone's been busy."

When James entered a room, it seemed to light up. He had that kind of bright presence and energy around him that was impossible to miss. It was one of the reasons Ryan smiled so much around him.

"Yep," Ryan agreed, gesturing around. Some pieces were finished, but a lot of stuff needed staining, and he'd been waiting for a good, warm, dry day.

They'd finally had it, with no time to spare. The show setup was tomorrow night. These had to get their final coat of stain so they'd be dry in time.

"Ready to work?" Ryan asked. James had worn that same cute outfit—dark jeans and a plaid shirt—that he had on his first time visiting. These must be his work clothes.

"Yep. Your turn to order me around!" James grinned.

Ryan abruptly remembered—or his body did, or both—that it was their first time seeing each other in person since the kisses in James's kitchen.

"Great," Ryan clapped his hands together. He pulled open the sliding window-doors along the back of the building. He'd gotten off work at three after an early shift. It was early enough in the day that they could get a few more hours of fresh air and sunshine in here.

"Breezy," James commented.

Ryan remembered how cold James got. "Are you fine with that?"

“Better than getting a paint high,” James laughed. “I’m fine.” He spotted the paint brushes and grabbed one, tapping it against his palm. “Just show me what to do.”

It was easy instructing him. He listened well and paid attention when Ryan told him how to paint along the grain to highlight the character of the wood.

Better yet, he actually followed those instructions. That gave him a big leg up on half the apprentices they saw at the company.

Ryan was able to leave him to staining the wine bottle holders while he sanded down the sets of coasters. “So,” Ryan spoke up when they had a comfortable moment, “how was your week?”

“Great,” James told him. “Got our website almost set up.”

“Oh, shit. Sorry. I haven’t had a chance to look yet,” Ryan winced. James had been texting him updates, but he hadn’t texted back much. Combined with what they’d last done together, James might be thinking he was withdrawing.

“No problem,” James answered. “This is all more important.”

“I’m sure it looks great. Show me after this is done,” Ryan told him, and James brightened up.

“Will do. How about yours?”

Aside from work and then more work on this, Ryan hadn’t had much time for anything fun. He entertained James with anecdotes from the job site. A terribly misdirected nail gun had almost taken out a stack of windows that day.

“That must be taking a toll, all this extra work,” James frowned. “You should teach me the basics so I can do... you know, the grunt work.”

Actually, that sounded perfect. “Really?” Ryan asked to be sure. “It is tough sometimes.”

James eyed him. “You think I’m allergic to hard work?” he teased, but he was a little affronted. He probably thought Ryan didn’t think he was manly enough for it or something. Ryan had read about that online.

“Nah. You’re here,” Ryan gestured around with the brush, almost splashing stain on James. “Oops.”

“You painting me? I’ll paint you,” James threatened, his eyes crinkling in another of those adorable smiles.

Ryan laughed. “We *can’t* get into a stain fight.”

“Agreed,” James smirked. “No time, no extra supplies. You’re so damn practical.”

“So are you, Mr. I Track Everything In A Spreadsheet, Probably Even My Breakfasts...”

James turned red.

“What? No,” Ryan exclaimed, his belly rumbling with his laugh.

“I *once* tracked my meal intake, just to optimize—oh, shut up,” James laughed. He was flustered.

Oops. Ryan really wanted to kiss him. He shivered and quickly moved around to the other side of the shoe rack he was working on. He focused on staining the rods along the back. “See? Nerd.”

“I’m proud of it.”

“I need a nerd keeping me on track. Obviously. Look at all this!” Ryan gestured around the workshop.

He knew for damn certain he would have worked on *maybe* a piece a week, if the right people had asked him to. With James texting him every morning to see what he was working on that day, dropping off supplies, and telling him his lumber budget, he had direction and focus.

“Damn straight,” James agreed, dipping his brush in thinner. “There. What next?”

Ryan shook his head. James worked well *and* fast, without the lazy coffee breaks of half his coworkers, and even himself. “Stop putting me to shame.”

“You have more surface area.”

“I sure do,” Ryan laughed and patted his chest. The humor was not lost on James, who cracked up. “But you’re pretty flexible. Jesus, the day after climbing!”

“You couldn’t move?” James laughed. “That’s a problem, yeah.”

“I kinda want to go again, though,” Ryan admitted. “It was weirdly... addictive?”

“Yes! I know, right?” James enthused, lighting up. That was it. He could just let James talk away now. “And you should see the outdoor climbing here.”

“Mm?”

“Southern New Brunswick. There’s nothing around at all except some good routes. Well, we don’t have any tricky routes exactly, nothing graded above a 5.13, but we’re working on it. There’s a group of local climbers—I go out with them sometimes,” James paused to explain. “We’re planning to climb over Thanksgiving. And I might go alone, too. It’s technically dangerous, but you can belay yourself, too.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, it’s not for amateurs,” James warned. “There’s a lot that can go wrong. You anchor yourself and you can use a regular grigri, like the locking device you used. Or you can use one specially made for it.”

Ryan’s brows pinched with worry. All he could see was James getting hurt out there in the wilderness with nobody to help. “I can drive down for part of the weekend,” he offered. “If you need a partner.”

James’s expression lit up. “Would you? I’m sure my dad would like to have you over. I’m not sure which house I’m going to for... what dinner... but we could sort that out.”

“My parents will be disappointed if I miss supper,” Ryan chuckled. He hadn’t missed that—divorced parents, then. That had to be rough. “But I could drop by, if you want.”

“Ahh, right.” James smiled as he started picking up stray pieces of wood and tidying up around Ryan, helping clean up. “Your parents get on with you, then?”

“Pretty well, yeah.” Ryan smiled. “I’m lucky.”

“Mine... sort of do. Oh, you’ll see,” James rolled his eyes as he shrugged. “Whatever. It’s fake-turkey dinner and a good chance to climb.”

Near the end of their work session, Ryan remembered his conversation with Kevin. James was almost finished screwing the hooks into the front door shelves and key racks when Ryan turned to him.

“Hey, speaking of suppers, are you free tomorrow?”

“I could be,” James smiled, looking up at him. “Why?”

“I often have Sunday barbecues with my buddies. You know Cam, Jackson, and Thomas?”

James chuckled. “Yeah. I’ve heard of their little...” he trailed off.



“Commune?” Ryan supplied with a laugh. The three brothers owned houses next to each other with a shared backyard, and all three had boyfriends who lived with them. That made them a novelty. No doubt James *had* heard of them. “You can say it.”

“You said it, not me!” James chuckled. “Yeah, I’ve met them at the auctions a couple times.”

“You wanna come to a barbecue tomorrow? They’re dying to meet you. As—as my friend, and business partner,” Ryan added, his cheeks burning. He didn’t want it to sound like he’d been gossiping about kissing James the way he... well, he had. Or that he thought they were... more than friends.

James was blushing, too. “Yeah, I’d like that. Just tell me where and when.”

“I’ll text you the address,” Ryan promised, but he was already smiling. He couldn’t wait for James to meet everyone.

Then, James took a breath, looking like he was preparing for a less pleasant conversation. “Have you told them about me being trans?”

“God, no,” Ryan quickly said, then caught his breath. “I mean, not that it’s bad. Just, I read it was rude.”

James was chuckling again, and that look in his eyes was unmistakably fond. Ryan wished he could see that look directed at him more often. “How much *did* you read?” he grinned.

Ryan cleared his throat, embarrassed now. “Only the basics. A lot of stuff said *ask the person you know because everyone’s different*, so it wasn’t... terribly helpful.”

“Still,” James smiled. “Thanks. Yeah. I’m not *hiding* it, but it’s nice not to have it be the first thing people know about me.”

That made complete sense to Ryan. In fact, that was exactly how he treated his sexuality, especially on the job. It took him a second to wrap his brain around the wisdom of that sentence. “Yeah. Yeah, I get it.”

James nodded thoughtfully, then smiled again. “Thanks for inviting me, too. I was worried that we... you know... screwed up.”

“No, no,” Ryan quickly chuckled. “Just, with this coming up—”

“Better to focus on it, yeah—”

“Yep, distractions—”

“Yeah.”

They stopped fumbling to agree with each other. Ryan’s heart skipped a beat as he realized how close James was standing, one hand full of brushes. “Sink’s there,” Ryan mumbled after a moment.

“Cool.”

James rinsed them off while Ryan stood back to check their work and make sure they weren’t missing anything.

Ryan wasn’t sure how long it had been. Time flew by with idle chatting, not to mention teaching James all the basic finishing steps of his work. “Want to come in for supper?” Ryan asked.

“Sure,” James smiled. “If you don’t mind.”

“Course I don’t mind,” Ryan didn’t miss the chance to parrot, grinning. “That’s why I asked, duh.”

“Jerk,” James stuck out his tongue and walked ahead of Ryan to his house.

Ryan laughed, leaving the full-length windows open to air out the workshop while the pieces dried. Whether or not they were making out, it was just *easy* to be around James.

“I found a vegan pizza at the store. I’ve been keeping it in my freezer for this occasion.”

James brightened up so much that Ryan kind of wanted to hug him. How infrequently did people take his diet into consideration or forget it?

As he pushed open the back door of the house and Ryan followed him in, James caught the way Ryan was watching him. “Yeah, a lot of people don’t think about that. My parents included.”

“Sorry,” Ryan frowned. “That’s shitty. Bathroom’s that way if you want to wash up first.”

He had to take a second after James stepped through the door and closed it just to draw a breath and let it out.

Whether or not they were sticking to being business partners, James’s presence was intoxicating. Sooner or later, that was going to be a problem unless he got himself under control now.

## James

It was stupid early to be awake, but the second James's eyes opened, he jolted to life.

He had so much to do today, and he couldn't miss any of his buses.

"Shower," he mumbled to himself. The sooner he hit the shower, the sooner he could fool himself into feeling awake.

James started the kettle on his way past the kitchen. He was glad that after Ryan had dropped him off last night, he'd thought to fill it with water.

And there it was: the prickle of heat that glided through his body at the thought of Ryan. Driving him home, absentmindedly running his hand back through his hair. Biting his lip and nodding as he listened to James talk. Looking over at him like he was the only guy in the world.

James shivered, shutting the bathroom door behind him and stripping his boxers off.

No harm in letting his memory keep going.

Those big, roughened hands around the steering wheel. He didn't have to imagine what they'd feel like running up his hips and sides to his chest. He remembered being pressed up against the counter, a strong hand gently running up to his cheek to cup it.

And the way Ryan kissed. Shit, he was good. He was slow and intense at first, taking his time with each suck of James's lip and each grind of their bodies. It was all James could do not to rub himself up against him with desperation.

Fuck, how good would he be in bed?

James gave up on the idea of not jerking off to Ryan *every single morning* that week. The hot water hitting his body made him moan his appreciation. He tugged the shower curtain across so fast he almost ripped it off its rings.

He needed to feel Ryan's body blanketing his in bed, Ryan's hands

tangling in his fingers, catching his hands and pulling them up above his head, Ryan's hard cock pressing into his hip...

He stepped forward until the pulsing jets of warm water hit his face. Sheets of water coursed over his flat chest and hard-won abs, and between his legs.

Jesus. Ryan had no idea the effect he had on him, did he? James had hinted that he wouldn't mind being fucked into the wall by him, but Ryan had backed off.

Sensibly, his brain reminded him with that damn phrase *business partners* once again. But this wasn't the time for practicality. He was allowed to imagine whatever he damn well pleased.

Ryan tossed sheets of plywood like they were paper. He could heft two-by-fours and twist them around without thinking twice...

And when he worked shirtless. Shit, those were the *best* times to visit. Sometimes he opened the workshop door to the sight of Ryan hammering nails into a backboard or running a strip of wood through the table saw. Sawdust stuck to his pecs, sweat trickling down his back into his jeans...

James braced himself against the wall with one hand, pushing his hips forward into the jet of water. The pressure of the day ahead of him was already weighing on him; he had no time to waste.

He let his imagination jump forward, pulling out the hottest images he could manage as he closed his fingers around his cock. It was easy to feel and see when he was hard. The pinkness poked between his thumb and index finger as he jerked slowly—at first.

Ryan's lips dragged along the hair of his inner thigh, his tongue a hot, wet line of *teasing* all the way up to James's cock. His eyes sparkled with their usual wicked glint.

Ryan's fingers trailed around his nipples, finding the skin with full erotic sensation. He'd be good at that. He'd use it to make James's back arch off the bed as he threw his head back and moaned.

Ryan's cock pushed at him, hard and thick and hot. Ryan buried himself inside James's body with a sharp thrust of his hips until their cries mingled.

Or maybe Ryan would whimper when James's slick fingers circled his hole and slid inside. The shallow thrusts of his hips would feel like riding a barely-leashed hurricane, pushing him teasingly on and on toward the edge.

Ryan would be tight around him as James slid into him. His breath would catch in his throat. His eyes would glaze over as he pushed his face into the bed and his hips up for him.

Fuck, the number of things he wanted to feel and have Ryan make him feel. The hot feeling of bare skin on skin, the groaning and grunting, no matter who was on top. James could feel their bodies working together to hit the perfect spots until they both shivered with bliss.

James's nails scraped the tile wall of the shower. His knees buckled and he came hard, thrusting into his hand and the water. He hissed at the sudden overwhelming heat rushing through him.

"R-Ryan... Oh, *fucking yes*," he moaned, his hips thrusting in quick, shuddery jerks. He let his mind fixate again on Ryan's body pressing hard against his, and how fucking close they'd been to ripping each other's clothes off right there in the kitchen.

When consciousness started to return, so did practicality, and he gasped under his breath. No time to waste. As far as quick and dirty showers went, he'd just gotten the dirty done. Speed was of the essence now.

Minutes later, his hair only half-dry, James jogged out the door, his backpack and game face on. Ryan worked until four today. Setup ran from six-thirty to eight-thirty tonight at the craft fair hall.

He had a long list of small but important things to buy—sticky-tack, more sheets of price stickers, zip-ties, the works.

On his way past, James opened his mailbox on instinct. A distinctive white envelope made him grimace, but he pulled it out anyway.

The return address was his credit card company.

When he made it down the street to the bus stop, he fumbled his earbuds into place. He tore open the envelope and glanced at the numbers.

He didn't need his spreadsheets in front of him to tell him they weren't good. As much fun as it was to spend so much time around Ryan, James's mood sank as reality sank in again. This whole thing had to pay off.

Ryan

“James and Ryan, from Hart Wood.”

Ryan still smiled when he said their business name. James had been so damn proud of it that Ryan had said yes. Even when Ryan had tried to encourage him to include his own name, James had refused. The wordplay was too good to resist.

“Ah, I’ve got you boys here.” The woman standing at the entrance desk checked off a piece of paper. She handed them both white lanyards. “Your table number is sixteen. Bring these tomorrow so our entrance girls don’t charge you admission if you go out to your car for anything.”

James took the lanyards and jerked his chin in a quick nod. “Thanks.”

“If you need anything to set up, let us know,” she told them. “I’m Kate.”

“Thanks, Kate,” Ryan chimed in with a polite nod. “We should be fine.”

As he and James carried their first load of stuff to their table, Ryan’s heart was thumping with nerves. He’d never done this kind of thing before in any capacity, and he had no idea what to expect.

James was walking tall and confident, though. Apparently, he’d manned booths for his small business incubator, so he knew how they were set up.

And he attended craft fairs, which didn’t surprise Ryan at all, but still delighted him.

“This one here,” James directed him toward a table in the center area.

Ryan glanced around as he set down his tub of signage.

“It’s a pretty good spot,” James added as an afterthought. He leaned over to check the names of the tables nearby. “I like it.”

“Good. I’ll start grabbing the heavy stuff first.”

James nodded his approval. “Good plan. We’ll get that set up first and

arrange everything around it.”

Each time Ryan came back from his car, James had made more progress on the setup.

Shit. It looked like a real business now.

They were hoping for a thousand dollars in profit once the table fee and expenses were covered. According to James, that was actually a reasonable expectation for a two-day show with a short Sunday. Only trouble was, James said they couldn’t predict which days or times would be the best sellers. Sometimes you stood behind the table and didn’t sell a thing. Other times, you couldn’t keep up with demand.

Of course, they hoped for the latter. Ryan hoped they would sell out their inventory. James seemed to be trying to keep his expectations reasonable, though. He wouldn’t engage with Ryan when Ryan said anything like that.

James noticed him standing in front of the table, admiring the banner he’d gotten from *somewhere* at the last minute. “Look good?”

Ryan could read the nervousness in James’s eyes as he took a breather for a second to gauge Ryan’s reactions. Ryan smiled. “It’s... awesome. Just feels real all of a sudden.”

“Yeah,” James chuckled. “I know what you mean. We’re doing this.”

Ryan was already in the hole for the materials, website setup costs, and table setup, but hopefully a grant would repay some of those costs. James had told him it would take time to hear back on that. Ryan let him handle those details. Just in case, they’d budgeted as if they wouldn’t get any help.

Well, not *they*, like he had a hand in it. He put in his sweat equity, and James did all those spreadsheet things to earn his fifty percent.

“Right,” Ryan said, clapping his hands together. Enough talk, more action. They only had a short window to set up. “It looks like you have the table almost ready to go. Where do you want these things?”

They went back and forth on where to put the largest items—behind the table or beside it. Finally, they agreed on the right angle to catch people’s eye without blocking in the next-door stallholders.

Next, they settled the banner position along the front of the table. It was easy after that to set up smaller items—jewelry boxes on a stepstool, serving trays tilted just so, wine bottle holders behind birdhouses. Eventually, Ryan let James handle the positioning. Every

time he placed an item just so, James would fix it—and James's setup *did* look better.

"Don't stop," James encouraged him after a minute, glancing at him.

Ryan laughed. "I thought I'd save you the trouble of fixing my bad eye for aesthetics."

"Dude, no, you *made* this stuff. You don't have a bad eye," James shook his head.

"Then you show it off better than me. Either way, that's it, isn't it?" Ryan smiled. "It looks awesome. Come see."

James came around the table to stand by him, then took several paces back to see the table from a distance. "Damn."

Ryan glanced at James to see his first glimpse of the table setup from afar, then smiled at the pride that swelled his chest. He was so cute all the time, but especially right now.

"And right on time. It's eight now," James told him after digging out his phone for a few photos of the setup.

Despite himself, Ryan was tired out. "We better get some sleep," he nodded. "I'll give you a lift home."

"That'd be awesome, thanks."

James never stopped thanking him for the rides home. It was sweet but totally unnecessary. Ryan wasn't going to drive home and leave him to wait hours for the next shitty city bus.

On the way back to his house, James was quiet. Probably worn out, Ryan figured. Fair enough—so was he. It had already been weeks of preparing for this weekend, and the ones coming up afterward. Keeping up with his own day job took enough energy, too.

When they reached James's house, Ryan pulled over in front of it and looked over with a smile.

As always, James thanked him again as he opened the car door and slid out.

"No problem. I'll be here at seven on the dot." Ryan leaned down and over to look at him. "We'll make sure we're set up over there, grab Tim's, and settle down for the day."

They'd been over the plan before, but Ryan just wanted to make sure. He was craving Timbits now, too, but that could wait until the



morning.

“Bingo. Seven,” James promised with a laugh. “See you tomorrow!”

Ryan realized only when he was pulling into his own driveway that his chest was aching. He wasn’t ready to say good night yet.

James was just easy to spend time with. That was all.

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“How can I help you?” Before Ryan approached the shopper, James swept in from the other side of the table, beaming.

“I was just wondering how much these were.”

Ever-patient, never mentioning the price tags in a way that would embarrass them, James gave the prices. He started to chat about what they’d seen the customer looking at—wine bottle holders.

Ryan stepped back to let him in, keeping an overview eye on their table.

It worked out well: James made first contact. He drew people in to chat with his charming and, like it or not, flirtatious smile. That was just the way James was around everyone, smiley and enthusiastic.

That, and very flamboyant. It made Ryan twitch slightly with nerves when James approached the older guys or the more guarded ones with girlfriends. But women loved the attention and ate up the cute little guy bouncing over to them with a *how-you-doing* or *great-fair-today*.

The morning had been slow, but business and sales were picking up at about the same rate. Ryan had to try not to count up the money in the box in his excitement. There was a float, after all, and this wasn’t profit—just gross income.

Still, it was a good sign. They weren’t all alone, like the three jewelry makers across the aisle with very similar product lines. James had cleverly chosen some pieces that the other woodworkers here sold. Others, like the key holders, nobody else seemed to be selling today.

And they’d already sold their largest item, the folding backyard table. James had positively glowed as he took payment for that item and helped the customers get it out to their car.

Ryan was starting to see the appeal of backyard furniture, but James had insisted they keep it smaller for now. There were already several

patio furniture makers in the area. Their rustic hand-woven benches were gorgeous but hard for people to fit into their cars.

“How much is this?”

Ryan stepped forward when a customer made eye contact with him and James was still busy. “Fifteen dollars for one, two for twenty-five,” he answered, smiling. He wasn’t as adorable and dorky as James, but *could* be good at customer service, too.

“Great. Are you a new business?”

“Yes. This is our first official event,” Ryan told her. She looked like a middle-aged mom shopping for presents for her friends.

“Oh! Good for you.”

“Thank you. Is there anyone you’re shopping for in particular today, or treating yourself?” Ryan asked with a smile, echoing one of James’s lines.

“My girlfriends. One of them is so hard to shop for, you know? One of those people who buys whatever she wants!”

The product solution was obvious—Ryan directed her toward the wine bottle holders. Then, James came wiggling in. James easily took over the conversation, laughing about girlfriends and wine. He played the gay best friend to a tee while Ryan took payment.

They worked seamlessly together. James was good at sensing when he had rapport with customers and vice versa. Passing change back and forth when needed kept them within arm’s-reach of each other. They soon developed a system for making sure any customers who came to their table were acknowledged as quickly as possible.

James was on Ryan’s left side before long, mired in a conversation about reclaimed wood. “We have to be careful which sources we choose, of course,” James explained, as Ryan gazed at him. He’d listened to everything Ryan had idly discussed in the workshop while developing products. He was a little information sponge, and it never ceased to amaze Ryan.

Still talking, James reached around him and tapped his right shoulder to indicate that there was a potential customer that way. Ryan jolted back to attention; James had the conversation covered.

He approached the next customer with an easier smile. The nerves from the first few hours were gone. It was just exciting now to talk to people face-to-face about his work.

And the compliments—hell, they'd be flattering for anyone. He was used to his work being buried within joists and walls, painted over, and only noticed when it was done badly.

Now, the technical quality of his work was front and center, and he hadn't fallen down on it.

"Oh, look who we have here."

Roger was there with a couple of his buddies—the ones who made Ryan's hackles rise. They had stopped by the job site before. They often took Roger out for lunch or headed down to the States with him on Friday afternoons.

They weren't the type he'd expected to see at the nice community craft fair. There was nothing *wrong* with them, exactly; they hadn't said anything shitty, but Ryan knew their type. They were the ones who would, if anyone.

"Hello!" James greeted, smiling at them, undeterred. "Oh, you know Ryan?"

"We work together," Ryan said simply, smiling at Roger and leaning in to clap Roger's shoulder in greeting. "Good to see you. Never mind me, what are you doing here?"

Roger was watching James for a second before he looked back at Ryan. "Thought we'd come check out the competition."

"Competition?" Ryan feigned ignorance, but he felt James stiffen beside him.

"Oh, you didn't hear? I have a regular stall at the north market now."

Ryan blinked at him. "Oh, I had no idea. I went last week, but I didn't see you."

It was true—on a quick morning scout of the place, no sign of Roger, but there *was* an empty table with his name on it.

"Good for you," Ryan added. "I had no idea you were planning to start a business too."

"It's a shame, we could have worked together," Roger added. "I'm Roger," he added, introducing himself to James with a quick nod.

"James."

"You his... business partner? Employee?"

"Partner," Ryan supplied before James could answer, smiling. "I do

the building, he does literally everything else.”

“That seems like the easy way out,” Roger teased, and Ryan picked up on that patronizing tone. Roger thought less of everyone who wasn’t built like a linebacker. He wanted to tell James not to take it personally.

James had cooled off, his eyebrow raising for a second. “You do it all solo?”

“Just about,” Roger answered, his chin tilted in that bragging manner.

“Did the market close early today, then?”

Ryan bit back his laugh as Roger eyed James. His coworker had to admit, “No. I left a buddy there to come check out what’s here.”

Oh, James saw just as well as Ryan did the way Roger was looking at what he was selling, and for how much. James looked like he wanted to say something, but Ryan just smiled.

*Not worth it, man. He’ll never follow through.*

“Better get going and leave you to it,” Roger finally said after an awkward second. He shook Ryan’s hand and clapped his arm. “See you at work Monday.” He looked at James, his lip curling slightly. He didn’t offer his hand.

“See you Monday,” Ryan answered with a bland smile. He watched the three of them until they were a few stalls away.

James’s jaw was tight as he watched them away, then looked at Ryan.

Ryan nodded toward the customers who were approaching with an apologetic look.

“Tell me later,” James said simply, then turned back to them with a bright smile. “Hello!”

Not for the first time, Ryan was grateful that James was so damn good with people.

## James

It wasn't hard for James to feel Roger's dislike for Ryan, let alone for him. The two looked like the kind of guys who barely got on at work and didn't outside of it.

Still, James shelved the incident until the last stragglers had been ushered out of the fair hall.

"Twenty-forty-sixty-eight-hundred-twenty-forty-sixty—" James mumbled. He was counting the thick stack of twenties that they'd pulled and hidden under the cash tray.

Once he finished reporting the totals to Ryan, Ryan counted to make sure he hadn't made any mistakes. James pulled out his phone to enter the numbers into his spreadsheet.

"So?" Ryan asked, the barely-veiled hope simmering away. They both knew their gross sales figure was good.

"We made about six hundred each."

Even James was stunned. He'd been hoping for five hundred each after expenses, after the weekend was done. If tomorrow gave them half the sales they were hoping for...

Wow.

"That's great, isn't it?" Ryan's eyes were bright, like he was waiting for James to give him permission to get excited.

James laughed, reaching out to high-five Ryan. "That's fucking awesome," he corrected him.

Ryan's answering laugh was rich.

It was six, just about time for supper, but James was already ready for bed. The long day dealing with a crowd had energized him, but he still had to recharge and get ready for tomorrow. There was a half-day of this, plus the barbecue with Ryan's friends.

"Right," Ryan nodded after a moment and locked up the cash box, hefting it under one arm. "I'll give you a ride home, huh?"

“Thanks,” James nodded, pulling out his phone to check the spreadsheet numbers again. “I’m just gonna Netflix and chill tonight.”

Ryan was quiet, which wasn’t unusual. When James glanced up, he caught a flicker of something in his eyes. It was gone as fast as that. “Right,” Ryan agreed. “I’ll just sleep, like, twelve hours tonight.”

James laughed. “Crowds take it out of you, don’t they?”

He’d seen Ryan’s best attempts to interact with people. While Ryan had done fine, it was clearly more of an effort for him. Despite his size, Ryan was actually quite shy. James wasn’t sure how many people had figured that out.

“Yeah,” Ryan sighed and rolled his eyes. “And I wanna get those custom orders written down so I can start on them Monday night.”

James beamed. He’d almost forgotten about those—a few people had wanted custom-made pieces, and he’d taken down those details. That looked like a good revenue stream, too. “Right! Cool. Let me know if you need me to pick anything up for them.”

“Will do,” Ryan smiled as they headed for the door.

They had to stop for a minute to chat with Kate about the day, but a couple of stall vendors with similar products who had been positioned too close together ambushed her. James let her go and went out to Ryan’s car with him.

“So…” James finally spoke up when they were in the car. “Those guys earlier?”

“Oh! Roger. I almost forgot,” Ryan admitted. “He’s just kind of an asshole. He doesn’t like that I’m friends with our boss, but he has a shitty work ethic. I’m surprised he’s gotten this far if he’s trying to copy me.”

James’s heart jolted. “Copy—you think he’s taking your designs?”

“He can try,” Ryan said simply, drawing James’s gaze as he started up the car. That handsome face and chiseled jaw looked calm. Ryan wasn’t even clenching his teeth to say it. “He’s a good woodworker. He’ll go far if he does.”

James nodded slowly. “Do we need to be looking at patents? Can we patent them?”

“I wouldn’t bother,” Ryan said and shrugged. “He’s not even at his own stall, what, two weeks? Three weeks after starting it?”

James saw his point. But the way Roger had looked at him... *that* rubbed him the wrong way, too. He had to ask. "Does he know about you?"

"Yeah. He's overheard," Ryan muttered, frowning as he drummed his fingers. "So his buddies probably do, too. I wouldn't worry about them, if you are," he added. "I don't think they're the hillbilly type."

James relaxed. "Okay." Still, the thought of Ryan working with some guy who acted like he was allergic to the gays made him roll his eyes. "Just dicks?"

"Just dicks," Ryan agreed, nodding.

James breathed out a chuckle, staying quiet until they got back to his house.

"Thanks for the ride," he told Ryan at last, leaning in to hug him once his seatbelt was unbuckled. "Great job today."

Ryan seemed surprised. He laughed and raised his arms to squeeze him in an awkward hug. He almost beeped the car horn with his elbow. "You, too. We did great."

"We did," James agreed with a cheery grin. With his credit card statement on the fridge, he was *itching* for the Monday bank run. He'd have to be patient for a little longer.

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After Saturday's rush of shoppers, Sunday morning felt mellow, and James didn't mind that. The hours passed fast, the fair open just until three. It wasn't until about one that customers started to pack the place again.

This time, without the desperation to prove the viability of the business, he felt more laid-back. He chatted with whoever came by. His goal was to firmly establish them as a great, new, all-local business to support.

Better yet, nobody seemed to recognize him from his old workplace. He even saw a couple of shoppers who he *knew* had walked away from his till back at the store. It was amazing what happened when he didn't have a girl's name pinned to his chest.

They sold out of wine bottle holders first, and then the stepping stool sold. The tacky signs were almost all gone when he stepped away for a bite to eat. By the time he came back, Ryan gave him a thumbs-up

and pointed out the empty spot where the small hanging shelf had been standing on the table.

By the last hour of shopping, their inventory was even lower than James had been hoping.

“I guess we don’t need to do a clearance sale.” Ryan leaned over and grinned when the last few customers started heading for the doors.

James laughed. “Don’t even try,” he warned Ryan. “That’ll cut into our profit margin. Everything here will sell next week.”

Ryan held up his hands and widened his eyes. “You’re the expert! I wouldn’t dream of it.” He hummed as he pulled out bins to start packing up. He was clearly on a high from the successful sale, even if he wasn’t enthusing.

James laughed under his breath, then beamed when Kate came around.

“Hello! Wow, you two made out like bandits! People loved it, huh?”

James’s face just about split with his grin. “They did! I’m so relieved,” he admitted to Kate. “I mean, I knew it’s all good work, but... competition, and our first show...”

“This was your *very first*?” Kate exclaimed. “Wow. Very professional.”

God, that was a relief to hear. James leaned in for a hug when she did. “Thank you so much. It’s been a long few weeks.”

“And you chose a smart cookie for your partner,” Kate winked at Ryan after hugging James.

Ryan smiled back at her, reaching out for a handshake. He was blushing. “I know I did. Thank you for the opportunity.”

*Oh my God. She doesn’t think...?* James bit back his smile.

“Of course! I have your contact details—I’ll be in touch before my next fair.”

“We’d love that,” James smiled.

Other stallholders came over to chat as they all packed up, the lights turned up and the doors locked shut to keep stray shoppers out. James was high on their results himself, itching to check the cash box again.

“Shall we head back to mine and settle up before the barbecue?” Ryan suggested when they hauled the last bin out to his car and leaned against it to catch their breath. Well, James did the leaning, while



Ryan looked like he hadn't broken a sweat.

"I'd love to," James beamed back at him. When they were in the car, he had to chuckle. "I think she thought we were—"

"Yeah." Ryan laughed along with him, his eyes crinkling as he gazed over at him. "I wonder how much we'll get that."

"Does it bother you?" James asked. He kind of hoped not, but either way, he had to know.

"Let them assume what they want. They will anyway," Ryan told him.

James smiled again. "Very wise," he teased as Ryan drove them back to his house. He bounced the cash box on his knees.

"Can't sit still, can you?" Ryan said, smiling.

"Fuck, no. This is way better than I ever expected," James admitted. "If only the bank were open today."

"I'll drive you there tomorrow morning, if you want," Ryan offered.

James brightened up. He hadn't been eagerly anticipating walking to the bank with that much in cash on him. "Would you?"

"Of course. I gotta deposit mine, too. Your house is almost on the way."

Sort of, if one ignored the detour through a few neighborhoods and an annoying one-way street. James didn't call him out on it, just chuckled. "Great. Thanks."

"You can stop thanking me for rides," Ryan grumbled. "Of course I'm gonna give you a ride whenever you need it."

James wanted *so* badly to make an innuendo-filled pun about that, but he bit his tongue.

A second later, Ryan's cheeks turned red, and James snickered. He wasn't the only one still feeling the tension between them. It flared when there weren't crowds of people around to distract them. Packing up with Ryan had reminded James of that very physical, raw energy he seemed to carry with him. It had been all he could do not to react to it in public.

"You're awful," Ryan laughed, but he didn't mean it. His eyes were crinkled, his hand running back through his hair as he watched the road.

James watched the hair wrapping around and sliding between those

thick fingers and imagined his own fingers tangling in it instead. "Mmm," he agreed. "I've been told."

"Are you gonna behave around my friends?"

"Probably not," James deadpanned, making Ryan crack another smile. "But, yeah, of course. I might be a little high off how that went, though."

"Me, too," Ryan assured him, finally glancing over at him. His gaze was warm. "It's good to see you smile so much."

"I always smile!" James protested.

Ryan hummed under his breath and looked ahead again.

James went still, his heart hammering. What was Ryan thinking? He seemed like the type not to say unless prompted, so he waited a second, then hummed. "Hm?"

"The more you worry, the more you smile."

Oh. Shit.

James looked out the window for a second. Yeah, he was positive in general and optimistic, but Ryan was dead right. It was a bit of a defense mechanism. It applied to placating a screaming parent or placating angry, drunk men.

It was just rare for people to notice that.

He swallowed hard, then nodded. "Yeah. We all have our habits."

Ryan's broad hand squeezed his shoulder, making him look over at him. They were at Ryan's house and Ryan was backing into the driveway. He looked over his shoulder, then at James as he let go of him and pulled the parking brake up.

James didn't say anything, his smile wavering.

"I'm glad I picked you."

Ryan climbed out of the car, and James had to take a second to breathe and process that. Ryan didn't seem terribly demonstrative, like most men James knew. The fact that he'd chosen to tell him that right now meant more than James could say. It was kind of the *I love you, man* of a sober guy.

James swallowed hard again to keep himself from getting too emotional and making Ryan uncomfortable. He climbed out of the car and smiled instead, shaking the cash box. "You unload the car, I'll

start counting?”

He could use a second to collect his emotions.

“Deal,” Ryan smiled, and he tossed James his keys. He only grinned a little when James totally missed catching them and had to pick them off the ground.

“Shut up,” James laughed, shouldering Ryan on the way by, and Ryan even pretended to stumble.

God, Ryan was the sweetest guy James knew.

Ryan

"The sale went really well. Yeah, I'm unloading the car now." Ryan propped the phone between his ear and his shoulder as he pulled open the car door.

"Awesome! Dude, you're Skyping me in tonight, right?"

"Of course," Ryan snorted at Kevin. "Dumbass question. Matty, you there?"

"Yep!" he heard Matty call out in the background. Ryan was on speakerphone with the pair of them. Matty was one of Cam's best friends, and Kevin was a good friend of Ryan's. Somehow, the two hockey players had wound up dating.

"Good. We'll just keep it casual. He'll never suspect a thing." Ryan only had two bins of leftover products to move inside, thanks to how well they'd done.

"He's oblivious enough," Matty laughed. They were sharing a hotel room; he could hear the TV in the background.

"And how's your partner to work with?" Kevin asked. He sounded like he was grinning. "Still distracting you?"

Ryan rolled his eyes. "He's great. Perfect with people. I was just his... wingman," he laughed. "It works great."

"That's a lot of *greats* in there," Kevin snorted. "We'll get to meet him?"

"If Skype counts as meeting, yeah," Ryan laughed, setting down the last bin. Just one more tub of table supplies and then he had to meet James inside. "I gotta go. We're counting up the money."

"Oooh. Awesome. Okay, in an hour, you said?"

"Yep! Maybe two. I'll ask Noah."

"Talk to you in a bit!" Kevin told Ryan.

"Bye!" Matty added in the background.

“See ya.” Ryan chuckled and hung up, pocketing his phone again. His friends were dicks sometimes, but he could tell they all—from the Rileys to Floyd and Greyson and Kevin and Matty—genuinely wanted to meet James. He just hoped they didn’t scare him off.

He pushed open the front door, then caught his breath.

James was in the middle of his living room floor, money divided into three sets of piles in front of him. He lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling.

James stirred when he opened the door and pushed himself up on his elbows, grinning at Ryan. “Finally.”

“Dude, I thought you had a heart attack or something!” Ryan’s heart still thumped as he glared at James. He kicked off his shoes to join him in the living room.

James looked startled, then smiled. “Sorry! No, just daydreaming.”

“What you’ll buy with your money?” Ryan teased without thinking. Then, he winced.

James chuckled at him. “Rent, food, power bill, and then the rest on the credit card.”

“Good man,” Ryan smiled. He sank next to James and punched his arm. “So tell me!”

“Another four hundred each.”

“On top of the six hundred each yesterday?”

James nodded, and for the first time, Ryan noticed that his eyes were a little red.

Christ. He’d been living on a financial edge. Every time they went out, Ryan automatically paid for lunch or supper. That probably made a difference to him. Ryan just hoped he could help him get stable for long enough to get his feet under him properly.

Ryan didn’t think twice about hauling him in for a quick, tight hug. That thinner body nestled into his side easily. He didn’t realize how tight his hold was until some bone in James’s back cracked. “Oops. Sorry.”

James was laughing breathily, his arms tightly wrapped around Ryan’s waist as he knelt next to him. His weight was supported easily by Ryan’s shoulder. “No. It’s fine,” he murmured, leaning into Ryan’s side. “I like being hugged like this.”

Ryan's chest warmed at the rough voice near his ear and the scrape of stubble against his jaw. He pressed his face into James's hair for a moment, breathing in his scent. Coconut shampoo and the faint smell of wood polish. James smelled like his workshop now, and that was sexy as hell.

He closed his eyes when James's hand rubbed idle circles along his back. They knelt there, quietly, side by side, James's face pressed into his shoulder.

Ryan finally loosened his hold on James and beamed at him as James straightened up again. Both of them sprawled across the ground, looking at the piles of money. "This is great. Especially for you."

"I can't count on it keeping up, but... if we do as well as I projected from now on? I could pay off my credit card by Christmas."

Ryan's chest warmed as he pulled James in for one more quick, tight hug. "Good for you, man."

The look of gratitude on James's face made Ryan uncomfortable. After all, it was half—or more than half—James's work that had already gotten him this far. Ryan was positive he could have applied those same management skills to anyone's business to get it off the ground.

He was just glad James had chosen him. *His*.

Ryan cleared his throat. "We should head to the barbecue," he suggested, gathering up his pile of money as James took his own. The third went back in the cash box to be deposited to their business bank account.

"Thanks for trusting me," James said, so quietly Ryan almost missed it, as they tugged their shoes on.

Ryan gave him a startled look. "What?"

"With your business. With the money, counting it myself. Everything, I guess," James explained.

God, Ryan wanted to hug him until all those worries melted away, but he resisted the urge. He just smiled for a second, then opened the door and held it for him. "I hear a veggie burger with your name on it."

As they walked to his car, side by side, Ryan realized he'd never felt so excited for a Sunday barbecue, and not just because of what he knew was coming.

He couldn't wait for his friends to meet James. Over years of knowing them, he'd never met a guy he'd wanted to introduce to them.

*But James... is different.*

James

“He sassed those assholes into next week.”

James’s cheeks were hot as he laughed, his hand wrapped tightly around the neck of a beer bottle. Ryan was beaming at him.

He’d been warned the whole crowd would be there, but it was more overwhelming now, in the middle of them.

Cam and Jackson, both of whom he vaguely knew, were the size of Ryan. All three of them jostled each other a lot. Floyd and Greyson, too, were both ripped like they worked out every day. Alex seemed guarded in the presence of someone new, while Thomas watched and listened more. Of all of them, Noah and Chase had welcomed James in with open arms quite literally, hugging him hello.

They hadn’t made a big deal about putting on veggie burgers and extra vegetables for him. When he’d tried to thank them, Jackson had waved it off and said they all ought to eat healthier, too.

James was slowly relaxing, even if he didn’t quite know how to handle them all, especially at once. “I didn’t like them,” he said as Ryan recounted the story of him talking to Roger. “They were giving me *that* look.”

Noah winced and clapped his back on the way back. “I know the one.” He was probably the most fem of all of them, his lisp pronounced and wrist limp. Camp was an understatement. James loved him already.

Better yet, Ryan didn’t seem to have a problem with Noah, either, which didn’t surprise James by now. Ryan seemed laid-back and willing to take all his friends as they were.

“He’s not usually that much of a dick to me,” Ryan frowned, looking disappointed for a moment. “And he knows about me.”

“That you’re gay as the day is bright?” Noah winked. “Why, do you bring your *Playgirl* to work?”

Jackson snorted with laughter.

“No, but... I guess I haven’t talked about it, either.” Ryan looked



sheepish now, glancing over at James. “He didn’t seem like he’d be *that* bad.”

“It’s different for us,” Noah said firmly. James shot him a look of appreciation and Noah smiled back at him.

“Yeah,” Chase muttered. He was about James’s size, even if his rolled-up sleeves showed layers of intricate tattoos. “We’ve been over this.”

Jackson scoffed. “And you guys won’t let us go harass them a little.”

“Definitely not,” James laughed. “It’s not that bad. It was just a look. I’ve had worse.”

There was a moment of silence, and James kind of wanted to melt into the floor and take back what he’d just said. Then Ryan touched his back idly, and Jackson jerked his chin at the door. “Someone get the door for me?”

The moment passed, and James let out his breath, heading for the door and pulling it open.

It was a warm, late afternoon for late September. James didn’t mind padding out barefoot onto the porch and closing the door behind Jackson. “You need a plate?”

“Yes, please.”

He held the plate steady as Jackson moved the veggies and veggie burger onto one plate. He looked away while Jackson got the meat.

“Sorry,” Jackson laughed. “Man, I’m glad you guys did well, though.”

“Me too.” James looked back at Jackson with an appreciative smile. Ryan hadn’t told them about his debt, he knew that much. Even so, they’d all applauded Ryan when—with James’s permission—he announced their sales total.

“And I’m glad you’re around. Ryan’s a lot cheerier these days,” Jackson smiled.

James tilted his head curiously, handing off the plate to Jackson when he reached for it. He picked up the veggie plate. “Yeah?”

“Yep,” Jackson said simply, and offered him another smile. He could sense that Jackson didn’t know him well enough to elaborate, but he was trying to welcome him.

It was kind of like being welcomed into their extended circle of family by virtue of dating Ryan. He tried not to think too hard about what

that would be like.

*If only.*

They settled down to eat first, bantering about the show and suggesting products. James had to put down his fork from laughter.

“Oh yeah! Dick-in-a-box boxes,” Noah nodded seriously, winking at James. “Pre-wrapped.”

Cam had his head tilted back as he laughed. “Noah!” he scolded, elbowing his boyfriend.

“Has *nobody* suggested wooden dildos yet?” Greyson piped up. The ex-cop was grinning at the rest of them. Floyd, his boyfriend, blushed. “Come on.”

“I think there’s different licensing for that,” Thomas hummed. “Health and safety, surely.”

“Not if you sell them as *suggested* use, ornamental product.” Alex winked. “For external use only.”

“Oh my God, you guys,” Ryan groaned. He hadn’t made eye contact with James since the suggestions began, and James loved it. They were obviously trying to embarrass him and see what happened.

If he didn’t want them to know they were kinda-sorta-involved, James could hold his own under pressure. But Ryan? For the strong, silent type, he was blushing a lot.

“Fine, we’ll stop,” Noah told them, waving the others to hush while he grinned. “So, James, you’re not scared off yet?”

James laughed. “Not yet,” he told them honestly. It was kind of nice to be around this many guys and have none of them be a dick to him. He wasn’t sure if they knew about him yet, which made his stomach jolt with nerves. He could hold off on telling them for now and enjoy it.

“Good. Ryan needs someone to keep him motivated.”

“I’ve noticed,” James answered, winking at his business partner.

“I admit it!” Ryan exclaimed, raising his hands. “I work better under external pressure.”

James couldn’t tell who murmured, “You *wish* he’d externally pressure you,” but he laughed as loud as the rest of them at it. Now he was blushing, too, trying not to look at Ryan’s bright red cheeks.

“Come on,” Cam laughed, pushing himself to his feet. “I’m going to check out that hive. I was told people wanted to see. And Kevin and Matty are online?”

“Oh, yeah!” Ryan winked at James and stood up, going with the distraction. On the way out the door, he waited until the rest of them were outside, then murmured into James’s ear, “Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine,” James murmured back. He didn’t know how to say *it’s nice to be thought of as a catch* without sounding like he was asking for compliments. “I know what it’s like being the single friend.”

“Oh, Jesus. Tell me about it,” Ryan groaned, leading him through the door now. Cam headed down to the bottom of the yard, where the bee hives stood near the back fence. “Okay, Matty and Kevin are online. They’ll keep us company.”

“They could’ve come out when I was inspecting this summer,” Cam grumbled. “Who’s going to bring them around?”

“I’ll carry them around,” Jackson offered, laughing. “Where’s the phone?”

James settled down to sit on the edge of the porch, smiling as Chase came to sit next to him. The other guys were arguing over who got bee suits and who didn’t.

“You all right?” Chase asked simply, and James smiled back at him.

“Yeah. I’m good,” James answered.

Chase smiled. “Good.” Then, he winked and leaned in to whisper, “Big moment coming up.”

It didn’t take long for James to put two and two together. He caught his breath and stared at Chase. “Is this...?”

“Yep,” Chase beamed. It made sense now why he had his phone out and facing the bee hive, ready to record the moment.

Even though he barely knew any of them, James’s heart was light. “Awesome,” he murmured, and he meant it.

He hoped he could find the kind of happiness all of these couples seemed to have found in each other. And as his eyes trailed to Ryan, crouching near the hive with a smoking metal device in his hands, James’s smile widened.

Maybe... just maybe, it wasn’t the *worst* idea to go with what his heart told him.

## Cam

Though James had looked skeptical, Cam had managed to encourage him forward for a look at the hive, too. There were only a few in the yard, and he'd already checked the others. He'd left this one for when his friends were around.

Everyone looked fascinated. Cam had long ago learned that was a universal reaction to bees these days. People wanted to know about the bees dying off, and they wanted to get to know how they lived.

"They won't sting unless you get up in their face," Cam reassured James. "We're just going to check on them, make sure everything looks normal, and seal it up again."

"Cool," James nodded. He looked nervous, but Cam smiled to himself. That would change once he saw inside the hive.

Nobody else had a full bee suit except Cam. He trusted his bees by now not to get too defensive. They were quite used to people walking and playing around their hive, and the queen in there was gentle, which made the bees' temperament gentle, too.

Still, he ushered them all back and puffed smoke in the entrance. Then, he lifted the top cover off and slid his hive tool around the top board to crack it open.

Immediately, fuzzy bee faces peeked up at him. Some bees waved their front legs at him as they stared up at the intruder.

"Hey, girls," he greeted softly, puffing more smoke across the hive until they turned around to head back down into the hive.

"So, this is a..." Cam trailed off, looking into the hive. Something was different: what looked like a box slid into the gap where he'd left a frame out.

Noah's uncle, his boss, was playing tricks on him or something. He eyed the others suspiciously, but everyone just looked clueless.

"Hold on. I think Bill left a gift for me," he laughed. Bill had mentioned a different kind of feeder this year, but this wasn't that at all.

It was a small wooden box with an engraving of a bee on it, and the bees had sealed it shut.

He had to laugh. “Okay, impromptu lesson. They love sealing shit up. See here? They’ve used propolis, which is a mix of stuff—lots of tree sap—to seal it up, since they couldn’t get inside.”

Noah laughed from nearby and approached, holding out a hand. Cam shook a few bees off the box, then handed it over to his boyfriend. He lifted out a few frames and checked them.

Everything looked normal—no sign of foul brood or irregular laying patterns, the honey frames were loaded full of honey, and it looked like most of the winter bees had already hatched.

Cam explained what he was doing as he checked the frames. One by one, they approached for a look.

Jackson even brought Kevin and Matty over. They thought the whole thing was even cooler by video where they couldn’t get stung.

When Cam slid the frames back into place, he laughed as Noah headed back up the lawn to join the others. Some bees were frantically arriving home to see what had happened while they were away.

“Come on, girls,” he coaxed them, sweet-talking them. Cam brushed them gently away from the spots where they could get crushed, then reassembled the hive.

“Now, what the hell did Bill leave me?” Cam laughed. “He knows I have a phone, right?”

It seemed kinda weird to do this, unless he was trying to fill the empty frame space. That way the bees couldn’t build crazy comb in there, which was a pain to clean up.

Once the top cover to the hive was on again and the last bees were crawling off him to fly back into their house, Cam unzipped his hood. He stepped out of his suit, then grabbed his hive tool and joined the rest of his friends.

The others were crowding close for a look. Cam took the box from Noah’s hands as Noah giggled at the tight seal the bees had made. Gently, Cam slid the metal tool along the cracks in the box lid until it popped slightly, then flipped the latch.

It took him a second to understand what he was seeing. In that time, Noah gently took the box from his hands and was kneeling in the grass in front of him again.

A few bees still buzzed nearby, crawling over Cam's back and Noah's shoulder. Cam had nearly forgotten them. In the middle of the box, a wide gold band was neatly peeking out from the gap in a velvet cushion.

*Holy. Fucking. Shit. This isn't...?*

"Cameron Riley," Noah murmured, his voice already choked up.

Instinctively, Cam's chest felt tight, and he cleared his throat quietly. *It is.*

"The gentlest, sweetest man I know with his girls, and with all his friends, and especially with me," Noah murmured, his eyes wet. "The second I saw you, I knew I wanted you."

Someone cat-called in the background, and both Cam and Noah laughed.

"Every day, I'm so glad you came to my table," Noah murmured. "You walked into my life, and... it was never the same. Everything we've done, and built together?" He gestured at their little friendship group, and the group of houses behind them. "Everything we went through, last year?" *My heart. The diagnosis... at last. The surgery.* Cam didn't interrupt, but he nodded to show he knew what he meant. "Christ, Cam, I wouldn't trade it for *anything*."

Cam wanted to sink to his knees and hug Noah. He resisted the urge yet, letting his sweet, sweet boyfriend say his piece before he started crying.

Too late, because Noah's cheeks were wet now, too, as he laughed sheepishly. Those beautiful, wide eyes gazed up at Cam as he clutched the ring box.

"Cam, before I'm a sobbing mess, I'll just... ask... will you marry me?"

"Yes," Cameron breathed out. His hands shook as he held the left one out. Noah's delicate fingers slid the ring on like he was a work of art Noah was carefully installing in his gallery.

Then, Cam grabbed Noah's upper arms to haul him up to his feet and kissed the *hell* out of him.

It took him a few seconds to remember that anyone else was around, let alone to tune into the cheers and realize they were for *them*.

His eyes burned as he pressed his face into Noah's shoulder for a few more seconds. Then, he pulled himself together as they hugged so tightly he felt Noah's breath rush out of him.

Cam had half-expected Noah to be the one to propose, but never for it to be in such a mischievous, mysterious way. “You sneaky bastard,” Cam laughed, finally pulling back for another slow kiss.

Noah was on tip-toe, his arms loosely draped around Cam’s neck. His wrist was bent and head cocked, his hip out at an angle as he beamed back at him. “I’m glad I can still surprise you.”

“Holy shit,” Cam laughed, rubbing his eyes with his wrist for a second before looking at his friends and brothers. Then they were there, hugging him—Thomas and Jackson first, and then his other friends, so close they might as well be brothers.

Even James, the newest to the circle, clapped his back in congratulations while Ryan hugged him. And Cam, despite his joy, didn’t miss the look that was exchanged between them.

*They so want each other.* But Cam didn’t tease them yet—he was patient. He’d wait and see to be proven right.

For now, Cam couldn’t stop smiling. Noah had his arm wrapped around his, giggling at every single thing people said, absolutely high off life. For at least the ten-thousandth time, he knew he’d made the right damn choice in choosing *this* man.

“Did you get Bill’s help?”

“Nope, I put it there myself,” Noah bragged, beaming away. “Last night when you and Jackson went out to the bar to watch the game.”

“Holy shit, in the dark? And you didn’t get stung?”

“I’m the bee whisperer,” Noah bragged, leaning into Cam as he wrapped his arm tightly around his fiancé’s shoulder.

“I never doubted that,” Cam said warmly, waiting for Noah to look at him. He kissed those beautiful lips again and ran his hand back through Noah’s blond, undercut, soft hair.

Then, Cam spotted Chase holding his phone sideways and grinning.

“Are you recording me? Oh, shit, nobody needs to see that,” Cam laughed, swatting at the camera as Chase tried to hold it out of his reach.

But if a few of them had teary eyes, it was for all the right reasons.

As Jackson came back with a case of beer and Thomas brought out a cake, it occurred to Cam that he might have been the only one not to know what was about to go on. For a bunch of ten-year-olds at heart,

they'd all kept Noah's secret for—God knew how long.

Just so Cam could be completely surprised.

Cam's cheeks hurt from smiling as he reached out with his beer bottle, clinking it against everyone else's. "Thanks, guys."

There was so much layered in that thank you that he couldn't say: *thanks for living here, thanks for being there for me, thanks for joining my family.*

As James leaned into Ryan and Ryan wrapped an arm absentmindedly around James's waist like he didn't even know he was doing it, Cam suspected their little family was about to grow.

Still so conscious of the warm metal ring on his finger, Cam ran a hand down Noah's arm as the hubbub of excited voices rose and fell around them.

"We're going to get you a matching ring this week," Cam murmured to Noah.

Noah tangled their fingers, leaning into him and pressing his lips into Cam's neck. "I can't wait." Then, he giggled in a bare whisper, "Think we should start keeping an eye out for Ryan's?"

Cam chuckled back and nodded at his new fiancé, glad he wasn't the only one to have noticed.

Despite the dying summer, the crisp autumn air was full of love, and it was about damn time.



## Ryan

Ryan wasn't squeaking with excitement like Chase or slapping Cam's back like Jackson. Still, he couldn't stop smiling as he drove James home.

"That was sickeningly sweet," James laughed, rolling his head against the back of the seat. A smile played on his lips. He was glowing, and Ryan could tell he was just as happy despite barely knowing them.

"Wasn't it?" Ryan chuckled deeply. "Of all my friends, they've been together the longest. I knew it was coming—not just because I did the box, but just because they're so... you know, *right*."

"Yeah," James nodded. "Sometimes you look at a couple and you just see their chemistry."

There was a moment of silence. When Ryan's gaze flickered across to James, he caught James looking at him. Like he was a third-grader, heat rose to Ryan's cheeks.

*Oh, for God's sake. Just get it out.*

"Strictly-business is hard around you," Ryan stated. He kept his grip firm on the wheel as he let the other hand rest on the gearshift. That whole barbecue, staying by James's side and keeping his touches to a back-clap every once in a while? Tortuous.

James let out a breathy laugh. "Yeah, I'm glad you mentioned that."

"I've thought about you a lot," Ryan admitted, keeping his words as simple and plain as usual. He didn't see the point in dancing around the point. "I know it's not practical, but... I don't often get stuck on someone."

"Me neither," James said, and then that smaller hand pressed over his on the gearshift. A shiver of pleasure coursed through Ryan as his grip tightened. He cast another quick smile at the guy in his passenger seat.

Or maybe the driver's seat. He wasn't sure which of them was steering this, but he suspected it was James, if anyone.

“That’s why we have the legal stuff drawn up,” James said. His thumb rubbed slow circles against Ryan’s knuckles. “In case anything went south. I don’t think you’re the type of guy to get vindictive anyway, right? Neither am I. We could figure something out.”

Ryan let out a quick breath of relief. “Yeah. I was worried ‘cause you have more to lose.”

James looked thoughtful for a moment before his lips curved up in a quick smile. “The fact that you thought of that means a lot, honestly. But I’m willing to take a risk for...”

*For me?* Ryan’s heart jolted with surprise. He didn’t want to be presumptuous and fill in the word, but it seemed like that was where the sentence was going.

He cast another quick glance at James.

James’s cheeks were red as he offered a little grin. “For whatever this could be.”

*Yeah. Taking it slow,* Ryan reminded himself. They’d made out once. That wasn’t the basis of a solid relationship... yet. Still, there was an itch inside that told him he knew enough about James already.

They would be *so* good together.

Ryan pulled up to James’s house. He barely had the parking brake engaged before James’s hand ran up from his hand along arm, then rested on his shoulder.

“Come in.”

Ryan didn’t have to think twice about that. He unbuckled and leaned over the gap between them to grab a quick kiss. James smiled, his eyes sliding shut as his hand rose to tangle in the hair at the back of Ryan’s neck. Before they got too caught up in the moment, Ryan pulled back again with a quick smile, then slid out of his side of the car.

“Mm.” James almost wriggled out of his seat. He strutted up the sidewalk beside Ryan toward the back building where his apartment was located. Though they didn’t hold hands, they stood too close, the heat building between them.

James was a crystal in front of the sun, amplifying the heat and desire Ryan felt for him. Hell, he was the whole fucking sun.

Ryan barely lasted until they were inside James’s front door before he grabbed James’s shoulders. He pulled him in for a kiss that was hard

and heartfelt.

James rose onto tiptoe, his arms sliding around Ryan's neck as his lithe body pressed against Ryan's. His knee rose, sliding up Ryan's outer thigh like he wanted to hang onto him.

Their lips pressed hotly together, warm mouths and tongues and sparks flying. Their teeth clicked once, but then Ryan figured out the trick to kissing him despite the height difference and tilted his head just right.

"Mm, you're *good*," James breathed out against Ryan's lips. Damn, if that didn't make him want to prove it in other ways.

Ryan gave James a quick, breathless grin as he pressed a few more kisses along the cute young guy's jaw. "Should we sit down, at least?"

James moaned in mock protest and let go of Ryan, sidling out of his hold in a quick swish of his hips and sauntering over to the couch. "If you insist." Then, he said something else, but Ryan's brain didn't click into place quite in time. He was busy enjoying the view.

"Huh?" Ryan grinned.

James's grin only widened as he flopped on the couch and patted the spot next to him. "C'mere, cheeky."

Ryan was only too glad to collapse on the couch. "I guess I don't have to ask if we're gonna do anything."

"Oh, I hope so," James told him, smirking. "I haven't been carrying condoms to your place for nothing."

Ryan was positive his face was crimson. That meant James had been thinking of—at least—blowjobs, or some kind of sex. Ahead of time. Thinking of sex, with him, ahead of time. James was laughing at him, which confirmed his suspicions. He rubbed his ear and nodded. "God, I like that you speak your mind."

"Couldn't stop me," James promised, shifting on the couch until he straddled Ryan. The warm pressure of his thighs—and bulge—pressing against Ryan's was addictive.

"Good." Ryan ran his hand up James's back to pull him close. Their stomachs and chests met by the time his hand reached the back of James's neck and his lips pressed hard against James's.

James had to know how grinding against his lap was going to affect him, right? Ryan gasped against James's lips. The way he moved his hips in slow, deliberate circles and the gleam in James's eyes told

Ryan that yeah, he knew.

“You’re easy to fluster,” James pointed out with a cheeky smile.

Ryan was throbbing with desire, his nails digging into James’s back. “When you look at me like *that*, I am.”

James pulled back to look Ryan up and down, his hand running up under Ryan’s shirt. The slender palm pressed firmly against his bare skin, teasing the skin from his stomach to his chest, then tweaking his nipple. “Like what?”

Ryan’s laugh escaped in a quick rush of breath. He grabbed James’s cheeks, palms scraping on stubble, to pull him in and kiss those smiling lips.

James was just *fun* to be around. Every time he thought that, or something similar, it felt like all the pieces were there in front of him. He just wasn’t sure how to put them together and win James over to the idea. Or did he even have to win James over? James seemed pretty damn into this, too.

Ryan raised his arms to let James pull his t-shirt off. He fought the material away and leaned back against the couch as James lowered his lips to his collarbone. The grazes of lips and sucking warmth against his sensitive skin sent white-hot prickles of need through him. It was all he could do not to grab James’s hips and grind up against him.

James was actually trying to drive him crazy.

As if he read his mind, James ran his hand down to the bulge at Ryan’s groin and rubbed in slow circles with his palm.

Oh, Christ, that felt good.

James leaned in to lip Ryan’s ear and Ryan shoved his hips up into James’s palm, his eyes sliding closed. He craved relief, but he could hold on a little more.

“There are way too many clothes going on.” James leaned back, his ass firmly against Ryan’s knees. His fingers glided down the row of buttons along his chest, popping each open in turn until he shrugged his shirt off. He leaned back and tossed it aside with a grin.

James was thin but strong. Ryan’s eyes skated for a moment along the red, raised scars under his pecs. He had a treasure trail leading up from his jeans to his belly button. Ryan couldn’t resist running his finger along the coarse hair.

“Oof,” James squirmed with a laugh.

“Good?”

“Oh yeah, I don’t mind,” James smirked as Ryan’s hand continued up through the light fuzz on his chest. When Ryan hesitated over his ribs, James covered Ryan’s hand to push it further up to his nipples. “It was two years ago now. It’s impossible to tell if the sensation’s the *same* as before. Either way, the scar tissue gives me extra—different—sensation. The scars themselves are okay to touch.”

“Right.” Ryan hadn’t known how to ask, but he carefully memorized that information. He pulled James in by his sides, admiring the core strength he could feel running through his torso and up his back. Those strong arms came from James hauling himself up cliff faces. He lipped at James’s chest, bending his neck so his lips reached James’s nipples.

“Aw, *fuck*.” James was grinding into him, his breathing suddenly shallow as he rocked his hips.

Ryan smirked, pressing open-mouthed kisses around the pink nub. He closed in on it and flicked the tip of his tongue across a few times.

The rough, loud gasp that escaped James told him to try that a few more times. He did, and sucked on it the last time.

“Ry-Ryan, holy hell.”

Ryan’s eyes crinkled with pleasure at James’s breathy moan. He wanted to earn that reaction more from James. He ran his hand slowly up James’s back all the way to the back of his neck. He let his fingertip trail to his earlobe and up to his jaw, then grabbed his chin for a quick, firm kiss of their lips together. Then, he returned his attention to James’s other nipple.

James was groaning now, his grip on Ryan’s shoulders tightening. He kneaded his fingers into the muscles near Ryan’s biceps. His lips were parted, his head rolled back to expose his throat as he gulped and his Adam’s apple bobbed. Ryan couldn’t resist kissing it on his way up James’s neck to his lips.

“Your mouth’s fuckin’ dirty,” James accused him with a breathless grin against his lips. He sucked Ryan’s lip between his before Ryan could answer.

Ryan growled under his breath with agreement. His body jolted with heat once more at James’s tongue flicking along the sensitive skin of his lip.

The second James let his lip go, their lips mashed hard as they pushed into each other, tongues seeking tongues. Warm hands cupped each other's cheeks as their groins ground together, hardness into hardness.

Ryan was half-dizzy by the time James pulled back for breath and to whisper, "What do you like doing?"

"Anything you wanna do," Ryan admitted, running his thumb along James's rib. He tried to resist bringing James's mind back to his scar, even if his human impulse was to trace it. "I... really want you."

The words didn't seem adequate to convey the lust that pounded through his solid frame. Even James's light weight against his made him want to thrust up into it—or down into it, perhaps. Oh, fuck, that sounded good.

James smirked slowly, those lips so fucking divine that they distracted Ryan from his words for a split-second. Then, he scooted backward off Ryan's lap and onto the floor between Ryan's knees. He pushed them apart and grabbed Ryan by the thighs to haul him closer to the edge of the couch.

"Oh, fuck, yes." Ryan was bursting to be freed from the denim prison of his jeans, and the prospect of that hot mouth on him? He moaned when James's hand slowly ran over the hard outline of his cock, then slid his zipper down.

That sound sent a thrill through him.

He raised his hips to help James slide his pants down. His hard cock ached with momentary relief, then need once more.

Best of all was the look in James's eye—mischievous and in control, yet hungry for him. He ran a hand over his own cheeks, licking his palm and rubbing his thumb along his lower lip as he gazed at the hardened length. He reached out to wrap his warm, wet hand around the shaft and slid his tight grip to the base of it for a stroke or two.

Ryan couldn't have pictured a hotter sight or feeling. The tight ring around him felt so perfect that all he managed was a quick grunt of approval. Sense swam to him from some corner of his mind, and he patted the couch for his jeans.

"I got one."

That made Ryan grin. "Right. The one you've been saving for me," he teased. James laughed, flicking his thigh in a quick scolding for his cheek.

*Had* he been saving it for him? The thought was hot enough to keep him thoroughly distracted until the tight ring of fingers slid down his shaft. It was followed instantly by a hot mouth.

“Oh, *fuck!*”

He almost had to check if the condom was on properly, it felt so fucking raw, but it was. Good brand. He had to ask later—

James’s cheeks sucked in around his shaft. That was it for rational thought. The heat and pressure alone were enough to jolt Ryan along from his frustrated suspense into pleasure that rocked through his whole body.

His muscles tightened and he tensed against the couch with a sharp exhalation. “*God*. Yes.”

James kept his fingers tight around his cock as he slid his hand back up along with his mouth. He bobbed his head in long, slow sucks of his mouth to take him in to the back of his throat.

“How’d you get so fucking *good*? Jesus!” Ryan wasn’t complaining one bit. As James’s fingers gently caressed his balls and came up the underside of his shaft, it sent another electric jolt through him until his toes curled into the floor. He needed *something* to say to distract him from coming in three more seconds.

Mercifully, James popped his mouth off his cock and chuckled. He started kissing along his erection from top to bottom as he murmured, “A little intuition, a little magic...”

“I bet you have a five-sta—wait, do guys leave reviews on Grindr?”

For a second, James stared at him like he wasn’t sure he was serious, which answered Ryan’s question. Then he threw his head back and burst out laughing, his rich voice echoing off the walls as his teeth flashed in a broad grin.

Ryan’s cheeks flushed as he mumbled, “Okay, now that I know not, that sounds like an insult. Can I take that back?”

“Absolutely not,” James managed. He tongued the spot where the head met the shaft until Ryan’s head rolled back into the back of the couch and he was distracted from his mortification. “I’m making sure you never forget that.”

“Jesus,” Ryan mumbled, only half from embarrassment. James was sucking him back between his lips, his lips tight around the throbbing length. Ryan’s muscles twitched and his chest tightened. “Oh, fuck,

James—fuck, that’s... oh, Jesus.”

He hadn’t had anyone blow him in too many fuckin’ months. He was going to come any moment now, but he wanted his eyes open. Needed to see those dark eyes hungrily eye his dick as it disappeared between those sinful pink lips, and scan his face for approval and arousal.

Ryan was utterly safe in James’s hands. It was a weird thought to have out of the blue, but James’s thumb gently rubbed his inner thigh in a move that was more affectionate than sensual. He caught the expression of genuine pleasure crossing James’s face when he groaned. Maybe that thought wasn’t so out of the blue.

It wasn’t just the chemistry making his body sizzle; his muscles twitched and tightened involuntarily at the warmth and pressure. James bobbed his head faster, his tongue caressing the underside of his shaft every time it disappeared between his lips.

And then Ryan came, utterly forgetting everything else around except James. James’s hot mouth pursed around him. His beautiful brown eyes gazed up Ryan’s body to drink in every look on his face. His hand crept up from his thigh to play with his nipple until Ryan’s body shuddered with oversensitivity and he gasped for mercy.

Ryan slumped back into the couch with another moan as James pulled his lips off his softening shaft and peeled off the condom. “Fucking hell,” he told James.

“I’ll take that. That’ll be the title of your five-star review, huh?” James gave a cheeky grin as he stood up, presumably to dump the condom in a trash can.

The second he returned, Ryan grabbed James, ignoring his laughter and kissing him as he pulled him down onto his lap. He almost had to wrestle him onto there, especially when he smacked James’s ass. “Cheeky.”

“You like me that way,” James retorted, squirming against his thigh with a quiet moan. “But if you’re gonna do *that*, you’d better follow through.” He pressed another long, warm kiss against Ryan’s lips, then kissed along his neck and shoulder. Ryan’s cock softened and clearheaded sense swam back to him.

Ryan caught his breath and pressed a kiss behind James’s ear. “What do you like?”

“It depends what guys feel comfortable with.”

Ryan pulled back to get a look at James’s face. “In a perfect world?”



"I love blowjobs, too," James admitted with a grin. "Sometimes I let them get off with hand jobs or whatever. Sometimes I'll get myself off. It depends."

"I want to suck you off, too," Ryan murmured, running his hands down James's sides with a warm smile. "Scoot over."

James grinned and Ryan kissed him as they rolled together, then laughed. "What—where are you? Oh."

"Hi." James was lying sideways along the couch now, his head on the armrest. He grabbed Ryan by the shoulders to haul him in for another kiss.

Ryan wished he could just nestle between James's legs and kiss him for, like, another hour, but James would kill him if he teased him *that* much. Instead, he kissed back a few more times, then started to kiss down across James's chest.

A few spots above James's nipples made his whole body shudder and tense up. It was easy to read the reactions in his lean body: almost painful pleasure. Ryan kissed straight down to his waistband, then mouthed at his stomach and hips as he fought James's tight jeans off, leaving him just in his underwear.

"Damn your fashionable choices."

James winked. "You hate me looking good on your arm, I know. I'll dress in potato sacks from now on."

"Good. Easier access."

The way James's cheeks flushed and his hips shifted up to grind into Ryan's hand made Ryan smirk in triumph. He ran his hand along the shaft, aiming to help him grind into it, and he was rewarded by James pushing into his hand a few more times.

"Y-Yeah," James moaned. "To whatever you just said."

Ryan let his voice drip with suggestive teasing. It was easy to be seductive with *this* man squirming for his attention. "Oh, you heard me. You have a condom for you, or what?" He wasn't sure how that worked.

"Yeah," James told him with a laugh. He raised his hips to push his tight underwear down. There was more underwear underneath—black and strappy, holding James's dick in place.

God, that was more realistic than Ryan had expected. The hard shaft lying against James's thigh made him lick his lips as he gazed from it

up to James's face. "Can I...?"

"Oh, yeah," James grinned. "Please do."

Ryan ran his hand from the base of the shaft to the tip, squeezing lightly. It felt... damn close to what he'd have expected, actually. Warm, velvety, and hard. When James guided his hand, he bent the shaft up and nodded in understanding.

He'd be lying if he said it didn't get his imagination racing. Did James ever top?

"I can see your brain racing there," James teased, making heat flush through Ryan's cheeks. "Talk to me."

Of course. It wasn't fair to leave him hanging. Ryan grinned. "It's hot," he told James. "Do you ever top, too...?"

"Mmhhh." James was grinning, his body flushed with arousal still. That brought Ryan's focus back to what he wanted to do for him.

"So, I'm guessing you don't want me to suck this cock?"

"Yeah, it looks good, but the one under it feels better," James chuckled. His hand ran down Ryan's cheek to cup it for a moment.

Ryan nodded, stroking that shaft once more before grinding it against James for a moment. It made James's hips arch as his breath caught in his throat. "Like matryoshka. The Russian nesting dolls."

James's laugh was rich and loud again as he went from breathlessly aroused to amused in seconds, his eyes lighting up. There was a newfound appreciation in his eyes as he gazed at Ryan. "Yeah. Something like that."

*A little smarter than I play.* Ryan winked and brought his thumbs to the straps of James's jockstrap. "So, can I?"

"Long as you fucking hurry up with it," James grinned. He raised his hips to help Ryan ease down the fabric and silicone. Ryan licked his lips at the sight as James settled on the couch again, then tore open the condom packet with his teeth.

James's chest was rising and falling quickly. His body flinched at every little touch of Ryan's palm along his treasure trail to his stomach, then down to his hip. His flushed arousal peeked out from his foreskin.

Ryan was entranced, but not enough not to tease him. He ran his finger slowly up the inside of James's thigh, grinning as James

moaned and his whole body arched off the couch. "It's bigger than I expected. Yum."

"*Christ*," James groaned, trying to keep his breathing under control. He paused in the middle of unrolling the condom to clutch his outer thigh. "Years of T does that. You're..."

"I'm what?" Ryan teased, grinning as he pressed a slow kiss to James's stomach. "Hurry up."

James eyed him and laughed, then ripped the tip off the condom with his teeth. He twisted the bottom rim and tore that off with his teeth.

"Like an animal," Ryan smirked, sliding down the couch until he could press his mouth to the hair on the inside of his thigh.

James only had a wordless groan in response. He nipped a tear in the tube, then ripped it straight down the center and tossed the rectangle at Ryan. "Bastard."

"Nah. I'll follow through." Ryan caught it and winked, sliding it onto James's body with an extra rub of his palm as he kissed his way up James's inner thigh. By the time he reached James's cock, James was writhing with pleasure.

It wasn't hard to figure out what to do. He wrapped his lips around the head and slid his lips down to the base, easily swallowing it through the thin barrier. No gag reflex to worry about, at least. James throbbed with pleasure, his stomach heaving for breath already as Ryan's tongue flicked back and forth across the head.

"God, yes! You know how to suck a guy," James moaned. When Ryan looked up, he saw that James was groaning it into his fist. His other hand rubbed Ryan's shoulder.

Ryan took James's hands and moved them to his hair, then tightened his lips around the shaft. He started slowly pulling his head back and pushing it down again, keeping his tongue moving around the head the whole time.

"R-Ryan, fuck, yes," James panted, his hips pushing up. With Ryan's encouragement, his hands tightened in his hair. James pushed up into his mouth each time his head bobbed down.

All the gorgeous noises spilling from his throat were entrancing. Ryan was burning with heat at James's reactions, half-wishing they'd just hurried up and done this the first time they met.

But it was more than worth the wait, because he could read James's

expression now—every wince as he tried to slow himself down, every squeeze of his eyes shut as he tried to get control of himself, and then the slow smile across his lips that meant he was in fucking bliss and he didn't care about that anymore.

"You're so fucking *hot*," Ryan breathed out hoarsely. He licked around the head slowly as he looked up to look James straight in the eye.

James stared at him open-mouthed like he wanted to memorize this sight.

"Tell me if you want anything else," Ryan murmured, his fingers teasing the inside of James's thigh.

"Just... *this*, some more, but faster." James grinned, the muscles in his hips twitching as he tried not to thrust up in response to Ryan's touches.

Ryan moaned and bobbed his head faster now, keeping his lips firmly pursed around James's dick to tug as he sucked. James's writhing and moaning under him, and the way he thrust and ground up into his mouth... all of it was going to be stuck in his head for *weeks* now.

James threw his head back as he groaned. "Ryan, I'm almost—oh my God, yes!" He throbbed in Ryan's mouth, his whole body shivering and clenching. He let go of Ryan's hair and grabbed the edge of the couch instead, pressing his heels into the couch. He was pushing up with quick, sharp thrusts of pleasure. "Yes! Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck..." James's breathy groan scratched its way from his throat, his stomach heaving for breath.

Ryan tried to judge the pace and slowed his movements, letting go of the suction. Finally, he pulled his head up off James and licked his lips. Holy shit, that was *hot*.

James had his eyes closed and his arm over his eyes, but his cheeks were bright red, his chest flushed with arousal and breath still fast.

"You're fuckin' gorgeous," Ryan informed him in an undertone, running his hand carefully up James's thigh and side to his chest.

When James opened his eyes, still looking hazy, he grinned and grabbed Ryan by the shoulder. "C'mere."

Ryan let James pull him up, squeeze his knees around his waist, and kiss him hard. "Mmm," he moaned back, tongues sliding against tongues and warm lips caressing lips. Best of all, the way James's arm lazily wrapped around his back, James's thin body pressed under his...

Ryan's body still throbbed with pleasure of his own, but more than that, his chest ached with... happiness.

He hadn't had a hookup in years, if ever, that left him feeling this good. It couldn't just be the hormones, right?

When he pulled back from the kiss at last, he braced himself with an arm over James's head. James was lazily smiling back at him in a way that told him it wasn't just him.

Fuck. This was serious.

Ryan shifted to ease himself up, still smiling at James and rubbing his face. "Jesus. Wow."

"You gonna take off on me?" James grinned, pushing himself up to sit up on the couch. He grabbed his own condom to throw away. "You the love-him-and-leave-him type?"

"No, I have to stop by the yard before it closes and grab those pine boards. I like that I made you come so hard you forgot all about my schedule," Ryan winked as he dressed.

"Oh, shit, yeah," James laughed. He leaned against his kitchen counter to drink a glass of water. He shifted it to the other hand and smacked Ryan's ass when he passed by on the way to the bathroom. "Now who's cheeky?"

"I can be," Ryan agreed, cracking his jaw and licking his lips with a suggestive wink.

James bit his lip, those gorgeous dark eyes falling to the floor for just a second of flirting before he waved his hand. "Go on, get cleaned up before I keep you here and you lose out on our deal."

Ryan's chest was still warm, and he was relaxed, yet purposeful as he strode for the bathroom. He couldn't remember the last time his cheeks hurt so much from smiling.

James

“You’ve done all that in only the last... two months?”

“It sounds like a lot, but it’s just a little every day.” James waved with the hand not holding his wine glass, but he was glowing with pride. That was his father’s way of telling him he was proud of him.

His dad, Luke, was leaning back, looking across the table at Anna. His dad’s girlfriend was a few years younger than Luke and had no kids of her own. She never seemed sure how to handle kids, so she treated James like one of his dad’s friends. His parents had split up years ago but she’d come into the picture three years ago, so it worked.

They were pretty good to him. If they’d had more room in the house, he’d be glad to stay with them over Thanksgiving. Unfortunately, he was stuck staying at his mom’s. After the last craft show on Friday, he’d taken a bus straight here and crashed at his mother’s house. Since he didn’t have a car, his dad had picked him up for Saturday dinner.

“Good for you, though,” Anna spoke up. “You look a lot healthier and happier than you did when you were job-hunting.”

His dad glanced back at him and nodded. “It’s true.”

“Thanks,” James smiled. He felt exactly what they meant: he walked taller these days and looked strangers in the eye more readily. He even occasionally answered the phone without that yawning sense of dread in his stomach. “It’s been great for me.”

Having a job—not just a job, but a business—as much as he hated to admit it, focused him. It gave him something to *do* that felt good. Their last show had gone almost as well as the two before. They were already lined up for three more as soon as he was back from Thanksgiving. Ryan had been working flat-out on production while James learned more about how to finish them.

They kissed sometimes in passing—James initiating more than Ryan, who still came off as shy sometimes. They hadn’t gone further since their night of passion just over a week ago. They were too busy working flat-out to replenish their inventory. Unlike many woodworkers and craft business owners, they hadn’t had the summer

to stock up.

James welcomed the challenge despite the heart-attack moments—realizing they were out of glue, or they needed a different stain color, or they'd forgotten to rinse out the brushes.

James rose to his feet to take their plates. "Thank you for supper," he told Dad and Anna, bringing everything to the sink to start washing up.

"No, leave that, we'll take care of it," Anna assured him. "You're very welcome. It would be nice to see you more, but I guess you'll be stuck up there, hm?"

"Yeah, it's hard to get away between now and Christmas," James nodded. "Craft shows every weekend we can get them. If we had a damn market stall, income would be more reliable. Our schedule would settle down..." he trailed off, then sighed. He wasn't about to drag up whatever the hell was going on with Ryan's coworkers.

"You'll figure out a way to get one," his dad said, and James's annoyance faded.

His dad sounded confident in him.

James had almost forgotten what that sounded like from a parent. He didn't talk to him often enough—his dad stayed busy with his job and building a new cabin, and James was pretty bad at checking in. It was only because Mom bugged him with phone calls and texts that he talked to her more.

"Thanks. Yeah. I will."

Conversation turned to other topics like the neighbors and Anna's coworkers. James found himself disappointed when he got the text from his mom.

*Will you be home tonight?*

"Knowing your mom, that's a hint," Dad gently laughed. They hadn't exactly split up on great terms. They'd done their best to keep James from being in the middle, though.

James grimaced. "Yeah, I guess so." He rose to his feet.

"I'll give you a ride back," his dad told James, so he nodded his thanks and hugged Anna goodbye.

"Take care of yourself," Anna said warmly, and it made James smile. Her understanding of his situation was pretty basic, but she respected

him. That was probably why it felt like she treated him like an adult, not her boyfriend's dumb kid.

"I will, thanks. You, too."

James shivered with the nip of the autumn night air as his dad led him out to the car. He waved once more to Anna before buckling up.

"Maybe I can come over to your place for Christmas," James suggested tentatively. His mom had only let him do that twice as a teen, but both years had been among the best James could remember.

Dad looked genuinely torn. "I'd love that, kid, but Anna's family wants to see her."

"Oh, you're going over to her family for Christmas? Must be serious," James smiled, glancing at the houses they passed. He couldn't help but feel like he was being led back to the herd for slaughter.

"It is," his dad said.

James looked over quickly. Was he trying to tell him something? "You two going to get engaged or something?" he asked after a moment.

"We've been thinking about it." His dad was better than him at hiding his feelings, like most guys. There was no mistaking the hopeful glow in his voice.

James grinned. "Jesus, everyone's getting engaged lately," he laughed. "Congratulations... in advance, I guess."

His dad laughed. "Thanks. Everyone?"

"A couple guys I know just did," James explained simply.

"Ahh."

His dad was good about the gay thing, too—had been even after the trans thing. That had been kind of a one-two punch. James knew by now that his father's main worry was always for his happiness and safety.

"I think I've met someone, too," James said after a moment. Hell, if he wasn't gonna see his dad for months, he kind of wanted him to know. He didn't know where the hell this was going with Ryan, but...

He wanted it to go *somewhere*.

"Oh? Do I get to meet him?"

"Not yet," James smiled. "It's early days yet. But something feels



different. I'd like it to be."

His father reached over to punch his arm gently as he came to a stop by the final light before his mother's house. "I'm glad for you, son. As long as he treats you right." He was out of his depth, but trying his hardest, and it made James relent and grin back at him.

"Of course, Dad." James chuckled. That protectiveness, at least, hadn't changed. "I won't break his heart either."

"Good man," his father approved. He pulled away from the light to round the corner to his mother's street. "Looks like the whole clan's just about left—that's just your mom's car and, what, your aunt's?"

"Yes," James grimaced. Aunt Kay was his least favorite. She liked to "accidentally" deadname him. Worse yet, she was invited to Sunday dinner, even though he'd specifically asked his mom not to ask her.

Family politics.

"You need anything, you can call," his father told him, pulling the parking brake once he was at the bottom of the driveway. He turned to face James. "Good luck with them."

James laughed. "If I don't make it out, remember me."

"Will do."

"Thanks for supper, again, Dad. And I'm really happy for you and Anna." His father smiled back at him as James leaned in to hug him tightly. "Keep me up to date on the engagement."

"You'll be the first to know," his dad promised, clapping his back. "See you soon, James."

"Bye, Dad."

James's heart hurt to walk out of that car, but he was almost tingly from the high of it. An adult, man-to-man conversation with his dad. Dad had always been pretty good, but the timing of it was the best part of tonight. It felt like armor against the battles he knew stood between him and the Thanksgiving tofu turkey.

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"Does that have to sit for so long? I didn't think it would help."

James tried not to get impatient with his aunt. Kay hovered in the kitchen, getting in his way while he took the tray of tofu out of the

fridge.

“Yeah, the longer you let it marinate, the more flavor it has. Like any other meat.” He stirred the marinade around the tofu slices, then flipped them again.

“Any other meat,” she repeated with a laugh, and James’s irritation prickled again. “So, we’re thinking a girls’ night in, maybe watch some chick flicks and popcorn?”

James’s annoyance must have shown on his face, but it didn’t seem to be stopping her. He hadn’t even shaved for the last week. He’d let himself grow out from stubble to the beginning of a full beard now. He’d gotten genetically lucky from his dad. He grew plenty of stubble along his jaw and cheeks, under his lip and chin. He looked more his age and less twinkly when he had it.

More importantly, the dark, thick beard was a pretty huge clue to obstinate family members. They could fuck off with their “girls’ nights in” and their talking about James behind his back.

“Right. I’ll head upstairs and leave you to it,” James nodded. He sprinkled more parsley into the marinade to give his hands something to do other than dig his nails into his palm.

Aunt Kay laughed like he’d told a funny joke. “No, silly, you’re invited too.”

“Oh, sorry. I thought you meant you and Mom. It’s been a while since I’ve been the gay best friend,” James said dryly. There was an out for her, at least, if she cared to take it. He’d long ago figured out that one gay guy was allowed in a girls’ night in. He just had to ogle men and know something about fashion or makeup.

She ignored him altogether. “I’m thinking whatever comes on TV, but if you want to start up Netflix, you can.”

James couldn’t think of anything he wanted to do less than sit around with his mom and his aunt and whoever else wound up coming over. Still, he didn’t have any better options. He had to try to keep the peace until Thanksgiving supper was over tomorrow.

“Sure. I’ll pick something,” he said. He slid the tray of tofu back in the fridge and made a break for the armchair before anyone else could claim it.

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It was hard to remember a time when James felt worse. This beat the hell out of lunch dates and suppers with his mom. Even beat that time last summer on his cousin's dock, yelling at each other until they both cried from frustration and anger.

He was curled up into a ball on the armchair, the princess movie droning in the background—one of his favorites. Aunt Kay and his mother were talking over it. His least favorite cousins, Leila and Jo, had joined them. Both of them had been absolute fashion queens growing up, so he'd never had much in common with them. He got the distinct feeling they were laughing at him every time they met.

Leila was around his age, but Jo was younger—she was just in her first year of university now.

“Don't let them sucker you into a credit card,” his mom was busy telling Jo. “They'll offer you iPads and iTampons and whatever else —”

“Aunty G!” Jo protested with a mortified laugh. “It's a tablet.”

“Whatever else, dear,” Mom told her and waved a hand. “But just ask James.”

They were *barely* using his name. He knew damn well that every time he left the room, they didn't. It was in the way they stumbled when they said the first syllable, or when they had to use a pronoun.

It was so fucking childish, all of it. It would be a hundred times easier for them to just use one name, one pronoun. One that would make sense to anyone who saw them address the scrawny bearded guy in the living room.

The only reason they didn't was some kind of family politics. They wanted to make him earn it—a game he wasn't playing.

“Ask me what?” he stated flatly, gazing at his phone. He had his messages open and was texting Jay updates every now and then. His friend was relaying cute things their cat was doing, and that helped keep him calm.

“How bad credit card interest is. I've *told* him, he should let me pay it off. Tried to call his credit card company, too—”

“Whoa, you what?” James sat up. “I told you I didn't want you doing that.”

“Of course, but I'm your mother, and it's my job to keep you from making stupid-ass decisions.” The girls laughed along with her, but

James's gut clenched as he sat up straighter.

"No, it isn't. I'm twenty-four, Mom. I'm dealing with the consequences. It's not like I just had a shopping spree in Montreal and then pretended I didn't owe any money. I've been paying it off for months now."

"At, what, the minimum payment? I still think you didn't need to recklessly put that on your charge—"

James unfolded his legs and stood up. She'd been against him "rushing into it" back then... never fucking listening to him in the first place. If she had, maybe she would've realized why it wasn't reckless. "My decisions what to do with my money and my body are *mine*."

Mom's eyes narrowed, and his cousins and aunt stared between them. The laughter of the characters on TV was almost jarring in the silence of the living room around them.

"Fine. I'm just saying, why pay thousands of dollars in interest when I could help?"

"Because I have a business now, Mom. I'm paying it off." He flopped back into the chair.

"Slowly."

"And," James said, his jaw clenching, "I don't appreciate you calling my credit card company. I don't want financial help from you."

He didn't mean *from you* to come out as harshly as it did, but it was true. With Mom, there'd be an obligation to reciprocate. She'd have a string of guilt to pull when she wanted something.

His mother clicked her tongue and looked back to Jo, forcing a smile. "And that's the opposite of what you'll be telling Kay in a few months' time. Laundry money adds up."

The atmosphere started to relax again. Leila chuckled awkwardly and twirled her hair while Jo started talking about the carwash.

James opened his messages with Ryan to scroll through the last few.

*Princess movies? I'm not surprised ;) I like one or two myself...*

Ryan hadn't made him feel bad about it, though. He never did, and James appreciated that.

They'd chatted a bit about that, and then Ryan had gone to soak in the tub.

As if on cue, the phone vibrated again.

*You all singing kumbayah yet? I probably mangled that.*

James smiled ruefully.

*Far from it. Just got grilled about my debt and surgery choices... Again.*

*Ouch. You OK?* Ryan added a heart emoticon afterward.

That made James smile even more. He didn't seem to be the type to use them, but he tried to when James did. He'd recently discovered the blushing smilie face. He used that a lot, especially when James flirted.

*I'll be OK,* James promised, though his heart sank. He wasn't sure about that. He added a quick, *thanks*.

*Of course. I'm still picking your cute face up on Monday right?*

Ryan was going to visit first thing. They could climb outdoors together before they drove back. The anticipation kept James going through this hellish weekend.

*I hope so!* He added the kissing smilie face, then paused and stared at it for a moment. No, it wasn't too cheesy. He sent it. Then, he added, *I'm going to sleep and hide from the interrogation. LOL. Good night.* When he got up to head to his room, nobody stopped him and he only felt relief.

*Good night. Sleep tight, don't let the rudes bite. xoxo.*

The sweet message helped unknot the tight coil of frustration in James's stomach as he changed for bed. Yeah, his family was rude, even if he'd grown used to it.

Why did holidays always have to end up this way?

Ryan

Ryan's hand just closed around the handle of his workshop when his phone buzzed.

It had to be James. He hadn't been texting anyone else this week. He rarely texted anyone, actually. He couldn't stop his smile as he paused on his driveway, pulling the phone out of his pocket for a glance. Then, as he scanned his screen, his smile vanished.

*Half considering messaging the nearest grindr guy who can host to pick me up. Lol.*

His belly was full from Thanksgiving Sunday dinner with his parents—a boring dinner compared to James's. The most exciting event in Ryan's weekend had been Ryan spilling gravy all over the beige tablecloth.

James, meanwhile, had been relaying tidbits from his last few days via text. Nothing word-for-word, and he was obviously hurting more than he was trying to let on. James had been pissed when his mom had tried to meddle with his credit card debt. Half his relatives at supper tonight had called him the wrong name and pronouns despite that handsome beard James had been growing in. The half who didn't hadn't bothered correcting the first group. Then, they'd tried to argue with him about trans celebrities. God only knew what they'd done now.

"Shit," he murmured under his breath. The town in southern New Brunswick where James lived was about two hours away. It was already eight o'clock.

He'd been planning to rip through a stack of boards he'd marked up yesterday, then fix up a few jobs James had finished. James was learning fast, but he was still new. He'd stopped putting the hinges on crooked, but his varnish jobs sometimes needed a second coat.

Ryan turned to head back to the house, his thumbs flying over the keys. Objections aside, he'd already decided what he was going to do. As long as he had permission...

*Would you let me?*

James's answer was almost instant.

*Hell yes. You don't have to though.*

Ryan grabbed his shoes and keys, then read the message and answered.

*Good to know. Don't sign on for a couple hours.*

By the time he was in the car, he had James's answer.

*OK. xox.*

Ryan chewed his lip. He hated James being stuck there awaiting rescue. If he weren't so damn proud, he'd buy him a cheap used car.

Actually, now that business was picking up, there was a thought—he'd *need* one sooner or later. A few of their upcoming shows were out of town. And they'd eventually get a farmer's market stall after Christmas, or after Roger stopped being an asshole.

The thought of adding a regular expense to the business wasn't too nerve-racking. Hell, he could sneakily pay the whole thing off for James. Having no life and working overtime had its perks.

Now he just had to convince James to let him do it... and just this once, rescue him.

He dug through his CDs and chose his favorite mix for the road before he pulled out of his driveway.

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Even though he'd strongly hinted that he was on his way, James looked shocked, and it made Ryan grin. Ryan was stiff now, but it wasn't too bad considering the drive had been dry and quiet the whole way. No stress, except the usual fear of moose.

He rolled his shoulders and unbuckled as his partner—and maybe lover—stepped out from the doorway. James walked along the low, long porch, shielding his eyes to squint through the darkness at him in the car.

“Holy shit, you didn't.”

Ryan laughed and stepped out of the car while James strode down the path in socked feet. Before he could say anything in response, James was pressing up against him. James folded into his arms easily as Ryan wrapped his thin body in his own strong arms.

He always had to be careful not to crush him against his front. He didn't make the mistake of thinking James was fragile, but he didn't want to crack his back, either.

"Thanks," James murmured into his chest, and Ryan swayed on his feet for a moment. "Jesus. Where are my manners? Come on in. That's a long drive."

That didn't sound like James. It sounded like someone near James, maybe his mom or aunt. Ryan smiled and didn't comment, though. "It wasn't bad. Everyone still up?" It was just after ten, as far as Ryan knew.

"No, most of them left, but my mom and aunt are. They're probably peeking through the curtains," James rolled his eyes.

Ryan grinned. "We can give them a show or not. Your choice—"

James's lips pressed against his as he stretched up on his tiptoes.

Ryan almost laughed with surprise. He reined in his amusement to kiss James back, rubbing his back. James felt stressed as they hugged, his shoulders hard and face finally showing his age. Normally, even not clean-shaven, James looked younger.

"Okay," James murmured after a long few seconds, and Ryan let go of him. "Come on in. I'll grab my bag and go as soon as you want."

"I'm good to turn around and drive home right away," Ryan assured him, following him up to the porch.

James wanted his family to see him kiss him. Ryan wasn't great at figuring out people's internal motivations, but he had a few guesses. Maybe James wanted to show he wasn't the ugly stepchild—understandable after this shitty weekend. Or, maybe there was something more.

Ryan didn't want to admit that he wanted it to be something more.

James opened the front door, and he was already smiling again. Ryan knew him well enough to tell when it was forced.

"Is this your friend? You should have warned us he was coming tonight." James's mother scolded him, but her tone warmed when she looked at Ryan. She had James's eyes and smile, and her hair was pinned back in a loose ponytail. She scrunched it and dusted her hands on her jeans before reaching out to shake hands. "You must be Ryan. I'm Gretchen."

"Yes, ma'am. He's my boss," Ryan grinned and shook her hand. As



much as she turned on the charm, he didn't want to talk to her. "Pleasure to meet you. Sorry to show up unexpectedly."

"I'm just gonna grab my stuff." James edged for the stairs.

"You're leaving already? Tonight? Oh, it's not safe to drive at this hour." A woman who looked like Gretchen, who must have been Ryan's Aunt Kay, came in from the living room. "I'm Kay."

"Pleasure to meet you," Ryan repeated, but the moment Kay went for the teapot, he shook his head. "Oh, I couldn't. I brought lots of coffee with me. I'll be up all night if I'm not careful," he grinned.

He navigated his way through a couple minutes of the social niceties, talking about his Thanksgiving dinner and the lovely weather and how the last craft show had gone. He was relieved when James appeared downstairs, backpack on one shoulder.

"We'd better get going if we want to work tomorrow," Ryan told James, who jerked his chin in an appreciative nod.

"Of course."

Their goodbyes were quick, and frostier than Ryan had hoped. He looked away for a moment to give them privacy, then did the usual *good to meet you* small talk on the way out the door.

Those couple minutes had been fine. Nothing dramatic—no yelling, no slips in names, no snarky jokes. But, he reminded himself, the worse a person was to another in private, the nicer they were in public.

James visibly relaxed as soon as he tossed his backpack in the back seat and climbed into the passenger seat. "Thanks so much for coming down this late," he told Ryan. They pulled out of the driveway again.

Ryan double-checked his headlights as he rounded the corner. "Of course. Couldn't keep me away. You all right?"

James let out a long breath, and Ryan cast a quick sideways glance. He looked like he had sounded by text—exhausted and frustrated and wounded.

Ryan silently reached out to cover one of James's hands against his knee.

"Thanks," James murmured. "Yeah, I'm all right, I guess. Or I will be."

"Not the same thing."

James grimaced. "Yeah. I wish you could've met my dad. He's a lot

cooler. But I didn't want to put him in the middle of Mom and me, and... you know. It's complicated."

"Yeah," Ryan frowned. He felt so boring—his safe middle-class family and average parents and siblings weren't a challenge at all. The worst bit was remembering everyone's birthdays.

"Sorry we're missing climbing tomorrow," James added. "I know you were looking forward to that, and me too. Outdoor climbing is totally different."

Ryan chuckled. "The rocks will still be here later."

That, at least, made James crack a grin, and then he laughed. "Yeah. I guess so."

Ryan squeezed James's hand, then let go to put both hands on the wheel. Seconds later, James slid over in the seat to rest his hand on Ryan's knee instead.

Ryan could live with this.

Once he hit the highway, they spent a good fifteen minutes comparing turkey suppers. James's sounded considerably more vegetarian, since he'd brought tofu to make his own main dish. Some of the veggie side dishes his family made sounded good.

Then, the music playing softly in the background, James let conversation lapse. Ryan was fine with that. Ryan let him enjoy the peace and quiet he hadn't had for days now. The town disappeared and endless scrubby green landscape zoomed past.

"The stars are pretty." James's voice was soft. He was leaning against the window and gazing out at the night sky.

"Yeah," Ryan had to agree. They'd only just been emerging on his way down here. Besides, his mind had been on other things, like how upset James was likely to be.

He was glad James seemed to cope well when shit hit the fan. He internalized, sure, but Ryan could help with that.

"There's a nice nature spot off the road, just outside Fredericton," James said. "The stars would look good from there."

Ryan smiled. "We'll see if we feel like stopping when we get there," he promised. "Supposed to be clear all night. By midnight it'll be gorgeous."

"Yeah," James hummed, then straightened up again. He seemed

calmer again, maybe sleepy. Then, out of the blue, “I wasn’t really going to message some guy on Grindr to pick me up.”

“I’m glad,” Ryan said. He wondered if that was the right thing to say—if James would interpret it as possessiveness. They hadn’t yet discussed what *they* were. But it was true; he doubted James would feel better after going home with some random guy.

“I haven’t hooked up in... three months, I think.”

That was unexpected. Ryan looked over fast at James, then back at the road.

Couldn’t afford not to watch the road, especially this time of night and year. A moose was so tall that its eyes were outside the headlights, so he wouldn’t even see the flash in the dark. By the time you saw a moose, it was too late. He couldn’t take chances even when he was alone. With James in the car, he found himself being even more cautious. But that was normal. He was always more careful with passengers, right?

“Right,” Ryan said, realizing he’d been silent for several seconds now. “No luck, or just didn’t want to?”

“I had offers, but...” James trailed off, then kicked his shoes off. He tucked his leg under himself, getting cozy in the passenger seat. “I don’t know. Either they were gross from the beginning, or I just didn’t feel chemistry. Nobody drew me in until we...”

Ryan was glad for the dark, because his cheeks were hot. James thought that about *him*? God, he could say the same. “Me, neither. I actually hadn’t slept with anyone in... a little longer than you,” he laughed. “I tried a rebound after my last ex and that didn’t work out.”

“Yeah?” James smiled. “Until I caught your eye?” He was teasing, but Ryan wanted to make him blush.

“Until you caught my eye. Bossing me around and being all smart. I like a take-charge man,” Ryan grinned.

Sure enough, James was already looking embarrassed but pleased. “Cool. I never think... you know, I always assume the worst.”

“Oh?”

“I figured you wouldn’t be into me because of, you know. I’m kind of my own worst enemy, but then other people are, too... so...”

“You run into that a lot?” Ryan asked. “On Grindr or whatnot?”

James nodded. "I have it in my profile now so some of them filter themselves out, but I spend—spent—so much fuckin' time answering the 101. Nobody goes and Googles it like you did."

"Least I could do," Ryan said simply. He didn't like being ignorant, after all. "And I was curious. Not in a zoo animal way..."

James chuckled, reaching out to squeeze Ryan's knee again. "Yeah, I get it."

"I just can't imagine."

"Yeah, you can," James corrected him gently. "You know what it was like growing up gay. It's not a hell of a lot different, just not as well-recognized. Most people can empathize somehow. They just go about it the wrong way. Like, if you tried to imagine being a trans woman."

"Right." Ryan couldn't wrap his head around what it would be like to be female, whether in his current body or not.

"Think of it the other way. Like, what if you looked so much like a woman that everyone around you assumed you were one? But you were still a guy, still you."

It took Ryan a minute of thoughtful silence to wrap his head around that one.

"You'd have to kind of roll with it, pretend you were one," James explained. "Since everyone's said you are, and figuring it out, let alone proving it to others, is such a pain in the ass."

"Right," Ryan nodded slowly.

"And that's not *too* far off what it's like being gay. You know, letting people assume you're straight sometimes, just for safety or whatever. And when you tell people, that's when all hell breaks loose."

Even that said volumes. Ryan had let people assume sometimes, sure, but more for convenience than safety. Sure, there was the worksite, but his work and personal lives were separate enough. James wasn't as flamboyant as, say, Noah, but he also didn't try to swagger around or hide his glances at men.

"Right," Ryan said softly. "I've done that before. I guess I do that at work."

James nodded a little. "Roger still being an ass?"

"I haven't seen him. He's been over on the other side of the site since then. Tan's had us on separate shifts. Oh, Tan's our boss."

“Right,” James nodded, drawing his leg up a little more and adjusting his seatbelt. He was sitting almost sideways, watching Ryan. “I’m glad you took the chance on me.”

“You showed more business sense in a few sentences than any of my buddies who’ve been giving me advice for months,” Ryan smiled. “And some of them are pretty smart, too.”

James chuckled. “I meant on letting me work on our inventory.”

Ryan frowned. James really enjoyed it that much? “You never worked with your hands before?” Oh, there was a joke there, but he wasn’t going to be the crude one.

James snickered but didn’t follow it up, either. “No, I have sometimes. Dad and I used to work together, before things got weird.”

“Weird?”

“With the divorce, and then me growing up into a... girl, or an attempt at one. I had to do fuckin’ Girl Guides and shit,” James grumbled. “Mom.”

Ryan carefully avoided saying how he felt about James’s mother and instead nodded. “That sounds weird.”

“It was like being a... a spy,” James laughed. “That’s how I thought of it, to get through it. If I’d been straight, holy shit, that would’ve been the opportunity of a lifetime. Later on, when we were teens... some of them thought I was a lesbian and tried to hit on me.”

Ryan chuckled. “I never know how to handle that.”

“Me neither! Girls are fun, but I can’t handle them trying to make out with me,” James laughed. He was relaxed now, smiling away. “Or wanting to be my straight girl best friend. What do I do with that? Make out with random boys for their entertainment? I mean, not that I haven’t... but not for a while. Not since we met. I, um, haven’t wanted to.”

Ryan laughed. “You’re cute when you get worked up.”

“Stop trying to make me blush. I know what you’re doing,” James teased, smacking his knee, but Ryan just laughed.

The conversation flowed easily between them as the kilometers passed.

James was in the middle of telling him about dressing in drag for a dorm party when he straightened up and looked at a road sign. “Oh,

we missed the stargazing exit.”

They were nearly back in Fredericton. Ryan smiled. “We can do it from my bedroom window. I’ve got a good horizon view. I mean, if you want...”

“Yeah. I’d like that.”

Neither of them said much as they drove through the quiet suburbs toward Ryan’s house. His heart thumped with nerves. It had been so fucking long since anyone stayed the night with him.

It was past midnight now. James grabbed his backpack from the seat, then lingered on the path with his hands in his pockets, his head up.

Ryan locked the car, walked up behind James, and slid his arms around his waist. He pulled the smaller man in against his front. “What do you see?” he murmured into his ear, breathing in that delicious hint of coconut.

“Cassiopeia, that W-shape up there,” James said softly. The neighborhood was silent around them at this time of night. It was just the two of them, guided by thousands of stars. Ryan felt so small and so, so lucky. Of all the men in the city, the country, *he* got to listen to James’s soft voice breaking the crisp, silent night air, and hold him close. James’s thumb stroked his. “And there’s the Little Dipper, right up there.”

Ryan silently followed James’s pointed finger until he made out the dish shape and handle. “Mmm.”

“And that’s Andromeda. The three stars together are Orion’s Belt. There’s his sword—”

“Or is he happy to see us?”

James almost dissolved in giggles, then elbowed Ryan. “Shush. I’m explaining.”

“Sorry,” Ryan grinned. He pressed a kiss against the back of James’s neck. “And I’m listening.”

“Good,” James approved. “In the middle there? That’s actually the Orion Nebula.”

“I thought you couldn’t see any nebulas... nebulae...? Those things, with the naked eye?” Ryan frowned, watching the little patch of light James pointed out.

“Very few, but that’s one of them.”

Ryan shook his head. What didn't James know a little about? If he was this smart at twenty-four, four years younger than Ryan, how much more was he going to absorb throughout his lifetime? A bit of this, a bit of that... James seemed like the Renaissance man type.

Ryan found himself hoping he was going to find out.

"Let's head in," James murmured. "I'm exhausted."

"Agreed."

James turned in his arms just enough to press a kiss to his lips, then lingered by his side as he led them upstairs to bed.

Ryan was tired from the drive and the chilly midnight air. They changed for bed together, their movements sluggish, then left the blinds open for a few more stolen glances at the night sky.

It was rarely easy for him to sleep with someone, but James was a solid sleeper. Once they found the right spots, his arm under James's head and his lips against the back of James's neck, they drifted off at the same time. James's body was relaxed in Ryan's hold, the stress from early gone as he melted into the mattress.

Ryan took one more peek beyond James at the stars that showed through the bedroom window. The streetlight outside caught the spikes of hair at the back of James's head. Finally, his eyes drifted closed.

## James

What kind of guy drove two hours each way at the last minute to pick him up just because he was having a bad holiday weekend?

James wandered down the fixtures aisle at the hardware store. He scanned the knobs and screws and brackets for anything on sale that he could persuade Ryan to use.

That was the most romantic thing anyone had ever done for him. Sleeping together that night had been incredible, but James's worries started to sneak in. It was Wednesday, and he was already convincing himself that he'd be a terrible boyfriend.

What could he do that was that meaningful? He didn't have a car, he couldn't woo Ryan with any grand gestures like Ryan had. And as much as Ryan had made it clear that he accepted James, James kept questioning that easy acceptance. Poking at the edges, like he expected Ryan to withdraw it.

He kind of did, honestly. Ryan wouldn't be the first.

They kissed sometimes in passing—made out, even, before James redirected their time to where it was most needed: frantically finishing inventory. They had scarce hours together after Ryan was done work on the job site for the day.

During the daytime, he kept busy. He talked to shop owners downtown, or did market research. He picked up anything backpack-sized from the two hardware stores and one lumberyard he could get to by bus. He'd started bringing home smaller items—signs, especially—to paint during warm days, with the windows open and the fan on. They had to squeeze the most production time possible out of their days.

Ooh, the sale shelf had a few new items. James stopped to snap a photo, then texted it to Ryan to see if he wanted anything from it.

He was only here to pick up wall brackets for the backs of the signs he'd been painting. He'd put some paint on hold for Ryan to look at. Maybe a car was a smart idea... but not until the credit card was paid off.



He got a response almost instantly.

*I want those 1” screws.*

James bit back his laugh as he walked back down the aisle for them and texted back.

*Even without assembly I can give you more than that ;)*

He picked up the packet. Half off because a couple screws were missing? That was a good deal. His phone went off.

*My lunch break isn't long enough for you to talk like that.*

James smirked to himself. It was a confidence boost to know he got to Ryan, but they still hadn't messed around again since that first time. He was starting to wonder if Ryan was serious about this.

*I'm free tonight. Oh yeah and every night bc I have no life anymore lol :)*

Ryan's response was quick.

*Is this Mr “we have to get ready for the show this wknd!” who won't let me make out with you for hours?*

Well, that wasn't fair. It was true—they *did* have to be ready for Saturday. Before he could answer, though, James almost ran into someone.

“Oh, jeez. Sorry.”

When the other guy didn't apologize in return, James was a bit offended. It had been his fault, but it was still polite to apologize back.

Oh.

Fuck. It was Roger.

The guy was a good four or five inches taller and way broader, with the kind of body that came from a lot of heavy lifting. He might have been small compared to the mountain of a man Ryan was, but James felt small against him.

And there was his brain again, reminding himself that he was never gonna be Roger's size.

James's gut twisted as Roger gave him a quick, tight smile. “Oh, hey. Ryan's partner.” Roger lingered on the word *partner* in that certain way, and James reminded himself to brush it off.

“Yeah. Roger, right? Small world,” James answered, his voice cool.

“Picking up stuff for your little stand? How’s that going, by the way?”

Oh, that was patronizing. James worked his jaw for a second before smiling tightly again. “Our business is doing great. How’s yours?”

Roger had a flatbed cart with some two-by-fours, a few half-inch rods, a stack of plastic bins, and medium brown stain. Those were the exact same supplies Ryan used for his playroom toy shelf and built-in bins. Could be a coincidence, but James suspected it wasn’t.

“Fine, thanks,” Roger answered, cocking his head. “Didn’t expect to see you here without Ryan.”

“I do the shopping sometimes,” James shrugged. What was Roger doing here on a Wednesday morning? Didn’t he work, too?

As if he read his mind, Roger jutted out his chin, half-daring James to ask. “The boss sent me out to pick up some stuff.”

“Right.” James was tempted to ask, *‘For a shelf? Aren’t you finishing interiors?’* He managed not to, though.

“And to get out of his and Ryan’s hair, if you know what I mean,” Roger grinned knowingly.

James didn’t like the prickle that sent through him. “Yeah?” He knew what Roger was doing: trying to plant some seed of doubt. No doubt Roger had something against him, or maybe against Ryan. He couldn’t let it get to him.

Roger wasn’t taking his frosty voice as a hint. “I’m sure Ryan’s told you all about him.”

“Yeah.” That was a lie—Ryan had just mentioned Tan in fleeting anecdotes. James was putting together all those mentions now, looking for something more. Had they once dated? Was that what Roger was so resentful about? He started strolling down the aisle toward the brackets he needed. “I gotta go, but good to see you.”

“You too.”

James waited until Roger pushed his cart around the end of the aisle, then let out a quick breath of annoyance. Roger never seemed to be hostile. He subtly pushed buttons, as if feeling his way toward the soft spots. One of those bullies probing to see what would hurt the most.

As far as he was concerned, secretly starting a business to steal the spot at the market had been a dick thing to do. Now it was like it was getting personal, and he didn’t even know the guy. What kind of history was there between them? Or between him and Ryan and Tan?

*Probably nothing,* James reminded himself and headed for the checkout.

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“Fucking motherfucker Jesus fuck...!”

Tears pricked at the corners of James’s eyes. He’d hit his thumb for the dozenth time or more trying to get the goddamn finishing nails in. Ryan was due over at his place any time now to pick up the finished signs, and he’d barely started this last step.

He couldn’t get the knack of this. Good thing the hammer was small and light. If he were hammering anything harder, he’d be black and blue now.

He bit back the sting of disappointment when he heard a knock on the door. Of course that was Ryan, and now he was setting a terrible example. For all he teased Ryan that they couldn’t waste time flirting when they had work to do, he was the one who was behind.

As soon as he opened the door, Ryan stepped inside, already all business. “Hey. How’s it going?”

*Breathe.* James straightened up and managed a quick smile. “Not great. I’ve been slow with the brackets.”

Ryan frowned. “Yeah? You think we’ll have time to cut the last batch today?”

They worked in a team, Ryan cutting out the template while James passed him pieces and tossed away the scraps. Then they worked through the stack in much the same way to drill holes.

“No,” James murmured and winced. “I need help.”

Ryan looked annoyed for a second, but then he took a breath and let it go. “All right. Show me where you’re going wrong.”

James had never felt dumber as he pointed out the nails. “I know it’s the easiest part of the whole thing, but I’m... clumsy, I guess.”

Ryan puffed out a little chuckle. “Well...” He looked around at the bare apartment walls. “You don’t seem to have a lot of finishing nails.”

“I haven’t in months,” James couldn’t resist commenting. The innuendo was too damn easy with him.

Ryan chuckled quickly, but he was in business mode. James's shoulders slumped in disappointment. Yeah, he'd been the one turning away Ryan's flirtation when it got too hands-on this week. But right now, he could use the stress relief.

"Right. You've only got one hammer? Pass me signs and nails and I'll do them."

"Sorry about this," James mumbled, pulling up a chair for Ryan first before finding one for himself and setting up their workstation.

"Hey, it happens."

It was such a dumb little thing—logically, James knew that. It didn't stop him feeling totally inadequate as he let Ryan do his work for him, passing over a nail at a time.

"I ran into Roger at the store today."

"Oh? Really?" Ryan looked interested now.

James bit his lip and nodded. "This morning, around ten. He sort of implied you and Tan... you know."

Ryan paused mid-hammer, his jaw dropping. "He didn't."

"Yeah."

"Tan's married."

James gave Ryan a look. He wasn't stupid enough to think that made a difference.

"Okay," Ryan conceded, "but no. He's straight." Then, he paused and looked hard at James for a second before he kept nailing in the bracket. "Are you jealous? You know he's a fucking liar. And I told you the other day—"

It was hard to explain the knot of emotion in James's chest, so he shook his head. "No, I know. I know that. I just..."

"He got to you."

"Yeah." James was quiet for a minute, trying hard not to feel like the overemotional loser here. "I think he's just jealous of you somehow. The market stall—"

"That was a coincidence," Ryan told him. "He told me he had no idea we were about to apply for it."

James looked at Ryan skeptically. Ryan was busy hammering and

sliding signs, his hands moving like a well-oiled machine. “And him looking like he was going to copy your stuff.”

“We all do the same kinds of products. He gets his plans from the same place as me,” Ryan said.

James thought Ryan was being way too generous. Roger hadn’t outright *said* anything homophobic—aside from the *partner* comment, sort of. There was just something weird about him.

“Make sure he doesn’t stab you in the back somehow,” was all James could say.

“What? No, he’s just kind of an asshole. I think he’s just bad with people. Patronizing, lazy, and *maybe* trying to copy what I’m doing, but he hasn’t tried to screw us over.”

“Yet,” James muttered.

“For an optimist, you’re not giving him a chance.”

James eyed Ryan, and this time, Ryan met his gaze. Ryan was right, but he couldn’t explain the gut feeling he had whenever he saw Roger. “Fine,” James relented with a sigh. “Sorry. Just, he tried to do the *oh, here without your partner* thing.”

“In a gay way?”

“Kind of. A *look at you without your muscle here* way, too.”

“Again... dick,” Ryan conceded, “but I’ll have a word with him.”

“No,” James waved him off. Last thing he needed was Roger thinking he needed his boyfriend involved or something. Not that he was his boyfriend, but Roger obviously thought he was. “You’re right. He just happened to mention this thing he thinks you have going with your boss to me... Is that allowed?”

“Nah, but nobody would take him seriously if he reported it,” Ryan laughed.

“I’m just saying. Irresponsibly, I never asked: all the levels of management know about this, right?”

“The business?” Ryan was already halfway done the stack of signs, tapping in nails in one or two blows each, and he hadn’t missed one. In contrast, the backs of the signs James had done were dented. James winced and tried not to think about that. “No, just Tan does. But speaking of the hardware store, I’ve been thinking.”

It was a clear topic change, but James let him get away with it. “About what?”

“You need your own car.”

Oh, hell, yes. Well, *no*, but yes. James frowned. “Yeah. I can’t get one yet, but I will as soon as possible.”

Another thing he couldn’t bring to this relationship—business or personal.

“I can cover it—” Ryan began, and James winced.

“In my shoes, would you let me?” James interrupted before Ryan started.

Ryan eyed him for a second, then shrugged. “Probably not if it were just friends. But we’re business partners. The business can own the car.”

“Right, and if Roger starts causing us problems? You know, copying our shit and selling it cheaper, driving the bottom out of the market? Or applying for shows before we do?” It sounded paranoid, but James *had* to think about it. That was his job. “Or I keep fucking up our inventory, and...” James trailed off before frustration could make him tear up like a... like a loser.

“Hey,” Ryan said gently, pushing aside the finished signs and turning to James. “I won’t let that happen. You’re new to this, but you’re doing great already.”

In James’s state of mind, that sounded like pity. He just rubbed his forehead, then shrugged. “Anyway, if market conditions change...”

“I can afford a second vehicle. I pay it off and I sell it. I’m not talking a new one here,” Ryan shook his head.

James hated the idea of having overhead expenses yet, based on so little time in business. He leaned back and chewed his lip as he slid the next sign over to Ryan. “Maybe. We don’t even have a regular market spot, though.”

Something flickered in Ryan’s eyes for a second as he watched James, and then he nodded. “Yeah. You’re probably right.”

They were quiet until they finished the signs, and then Ryan drew a breath. “Right. Off to mine to do those shelves?”

“Yep. Let me stop by the washroom and I’ll be good to go.”

James rubbed his face as he looked at himself in the mirror. He had fewer and fewer days where he hated who looked back at him. When they happened, it tended to be because he fucked up something that he felt like a guy *should* be able to do.

Like shop for hardware without becoming an insecure emotional wreck, pound in a couple simple nails, or let a friend help him.

And he couldn't help but remember Roger's words from the first time they'd met. He'd told Ryan it was a shame they hadn't partnered up. Every now and then, James felt like an impostor—the nebula everyone thought was a star.

There was always going to be someone out there better than him, better with a hammer and his hands. With more money and less time spent waiting to go from boy to man. With a bigger, better dick or a more relatable childhood.

*Oh, get over yourself. There's work to be done.*

As much as he knew *that* was the measure of a man, James couldn't forget that look on Ryan's face when he'd given up the car argument. He probably thought James wasn't acting much like one, and fuck it, he was right. Now, James had to prove himself all over again.

Ryan

Nobody was less likely to use Ryan than James. At least, that was what Ryan told himself as he ran a stack of boards through the chop-saw, passing them off to Sam.

They were roughly finishing the kitchen today so the gas line could get installed in time. Nobody wanted to try to hunt down *those* guys if they missed their target install date. Trades weren't short in the town, but there weren't a lot of them, either.

"Three more this length, then we'll need some more nineteens," Sam told Ryan. "Roger says the homeowners want the cabinets cut back an inch," she reminded him.

"Oh, right. Gotcha."

Roger couldn't mind his own business until they were ready for him. He'd finished up next door early and had brought his annoying self over to "help" them. It made a change from him begging off to go do bullshit errands and avoid working.

He hadn't yet had a word with him about James, but he intended to. Listening to Roger all morning, he hadn't heard a bigoted word, but that didn't mean much. Ryan was reluctant to admit it, but James *was* good with people. If James thought Roger had some kind of problem with him, he could be right.

Not that Ryan wasn't worried about James. He was clearly trying to avoid committing to the business, and it was hard not to feel like he was avoiding committing to *him*. The moment this work got too hard and Ryan grew boring...

Just like Isaac, he could vanish.

"Ryan, the guys can't deliver the cabinets." That was Tan, all business as he strode up to him, a pen behind each ear and a worried look on his face. "You nearly done with that?"

"Three more boards to cut."

"Right. Then I want you and Roger to take the truck to the lumberyard and pick us up these." He handed over a list he dug out of



his pocket. “And then the cabinets. Can you do that?”

Perfect. James had put a couple cans of paint on hold for Ryan to check, and Ryan hadn’t gotten the chance. “Of course.” Ryan didn’t love being stuck with Roger at the same time, but he could get a feel for him away from everyone else, at least.

“And then I want a word with you in the office after lunch.”

Ryan finished the cut and handed the board to Sam, who was holding her breath. That didn’t sound good to Ryan, either, but there was no sense in worrying yet.

“Of course,” Ryan agreed.

“Thanks, Ryan. Roger, did you get all that?”

Roger answered with a simple, “Yep.”

“Thanks, guys.”

Once Tan walked off to the house next door, Sam let out her breath and looked over at Ryan with a questioning look. “Well?”

“Don’t know,” Ryan admitted. He cut the last board and handed it over, then ran his hand through his hair to get the sawdust out and snapped off his safety goggles. “Ready?” he asked Roger.

“As I’ll ever be.” Roger was still slow to rise to his feet and stretch. He was stiff after half an hour of sitting on the edge of the porch watching Ryan work.

“Have fun.” Sam’s gaze lingered on him for a moment as she gathered the boards.

She’d been watching him more lately, like she knew what was up. Ryan had been looking happier these days—his family and friends wouldn’t stop telling him as much. He was out to her, and she knew he didn’t like talking about his love life at work, but she clearly wanted to ask.

“We’ll have to grab a beer this week,” he told Sam. “I think I owe you one.”

“Yeah! I’ve got a few things I’ve been meaning to ask,” Sam grinned.

“About his new boyfriend?” That was Roger, blundering in as usual. He could have shouted that louder, had he *really* tried.

Sam’s eyebrows rose and she glanced around, then looked at Roger. “Congratulations. I’m happy for you two.” It was a neat way to shut

him down.

Ryan bit back his grin of appreciation for her. “We’ve never been happier.”

“Ha ha,” Roger grumbled and strode to the truck.

Sam kept her voice down as she glanced over at him. “Is he right?”

“Something... like that,” Ryan murmured back. “We’re not official or anything, but...”

Sam grinned. “Good for you. About time you got back out there. Look at you—your own business, and now you’re dating...”

“I know. I’m almost a grownup,” Ryan grinned back at her. “See you in a bit.”

“See you,” Sam waved, juggling the boards to carry them inside and screw them into place.

When Ryan joined Roger in the truck he huffed with impatience, throwing off the parking brake. “Sam knows about your business, though, right?”

*It’s like he’s trying to trick me into confessing.* Ryan scrunched his eyes for a second. “Yeah, she wished me good luck before the shows last week. Oh, yeah, you haven’t been around much,” he added casually. “Don’t worry, everyone knows.”

Ryan wasn’t the snarky type, but Roger was starting to grind his nerves.

“Good,” Roger nodded. “You know, I’m liking this whole business thing. Long hours, though, isn’t it?”

Ryan was happy to chat about entrepreneurship with Roger, swapping words about what it was like to go home and build after a long day of building.

Just when he’d nearly relaxed, though, Roger couldn’t seem to help himself.

“You’ve got a bit of skin in the game, though, huh?”

“What?” Ryan’s mind turned for a second over their low-to-zero overhead. Then, he realized what Roger meant.

“I’m not homophobic, but—”

*Oh, good. I always like where this goes.* Ryan tightened his jaw.

“—your James is sure... flamboyant.”

“He is,” Ryan agreed, smiling slightly. He wasn’t going to let Roger make him say something he could run back to James with, especially since James had been rattled last time. *Your James* made him smile, though.

“Sure is the take-charge type.”

“Yep.”

Roger wasn’t taking his hints. “Bet you like that in a partner, huh?”

“I need someone to do everything beyond manufacturing,” Ryan answered. He kept his voice calm like he didn’t notice the smirk on Roger’s face. Roger wanted him to laugh along, and he was *not* taking the bait. “You know how much damn work just that is.”

“Yeah,” Roger shrugged it off carelessly. “But you can always buy stuff and resell it.”

“What?”

“You know, resell.”

Ryan raised his brow. “Most of the markets around here won’t let you do that. Local handicraft rules.”

“Suit yourself,” Roger shrugged as he pulled into the lot of the lumberyard. He was still smiling oddly. Ryan started to get the uncomfortable feeling something was up besides his weird obsession with both of them. Roger, a contract employee, *had* been in the office to negotiate his next year’s contract with Tan earlier that day.

That, together with Tan needing to see him, had him starting to feel mighty uncomfortable. “Look, man, if you’ve got a problem with my business partner or me—” he started as they strode toward the fence.

“Oh, no, not at all.” Roger looked and sounded sincere, but not surprised. He’d been deliberately baiting him, then.

Ryan managed to keep the conversation terse but polite all the way through their lumberyard interactions. They loaded up the truck bed, then headed around the other side to get the cabinets and check his paint out.

“I ran into James here a couple days ago, actually,” Roger spoke up.

“I’m aware.”

Roger laughed and punched his shoulder in a buddy-buddy way as

they headed through the aisles. “Man, what do they call them? Twinks? He sure had the eye of a couple of the guys in here...”

“Who did what now? Twinkies?” That was one of the older guys, Paul, who had been probably working there since time immemorial.

“No, twinks. Remember that guy I was talking to Wednesday? The one with the red backpack?”

“Oh, yeah. I know that one. Nice kid,” Paul said, glancing under the counter. “Speaking of which, Ryan, this is for you to take a look at.”

“What’s that?” Roger leaned in.

God, Ryan hated how nosy he could be. “Paint,” he said, which was pretty damn self-explanatory. “You got a sample?”

Paul handed over the paint stirrer. “Small world, isn’t it? I knew James before he was James. My daughter was friends with him in school. Good kid. Glad he’s getting his feet under him.”

Ryan winced but turned the paint stick over, examining the brown stain. It was natural but rich. A bold choice, but it would work well on some of the more elegant pieces—wine bottle stands and that kind of stuff.

It looked like Roger was processing that, trying to figure out Paul’s meaning. Ryan shot Paul a quick, hard glance of warning. He didn’t need to say another word, though. Roger’s expression had just cleared up.

“Oh, *shit*,” Roger exclaimed a second later. “I didn’t know he—she—” he trailed off, and Ryan’s heart sank.

Instead of acknowledging Roger, Ryan hauled the paint cans across the counter. “Put these on my account, thanks. Which way are the cabinets?”

“In the back. I’ll get Jon to point them out.” Paul came around the counter after typing into the computer. He wasn’t in a rush like Ryan.

Roger would *not* give up. “You mean James used to be...?”

“None of your business,” Ryan snapped back. Even as the words left his mouth, he knew it was the wrong approach. It would only confirm what Roger was thinking.

Roger shrugged and grunted. “Not judging. Just saying, it makes more sense.”

“What does?” Paul asked.

Ryan scoffed. “You’ve got something wrong,” he said simply to Roger. “Wires got crossed,” he told Paul, taking a breath to let himself cool off before he told Roger off. “Nothing important. We pulled the truck up by the second bay doors.”

They grabbed the cabinets without much trouble, working together to move them. Despite his distaste for Roger, or perhaps because of it, he had incentive to focus only on maneuvering the cabinets. Once they were securely strapped into the back of the truck, he let out his breath and took the paint cans from Paul to stow behind the seat.

Ryan swung into the passenger seat after shaking hands with Paul. He’d drop them off at his car on their way back to work. Tan never minded people grabbing something quick for themselves on these outings, as long as they didn’t take all day.

“Sure the paint was a good idea?”

“What?” Ryan had no idea what Roger meant, and he didn’t have the energy to care.

Roger half-shrugged. “If you’re in trouble for something... best behavior, all that bullshit.”

“I’m not assuming I’m in trouble,” Ryan answered. “But if you know what’s going on, feel free to tell me.”

Roger smiled and brushed it off. “Nah. All right, hopefully traffic isn’t bad.” He twiddled with the radio while Ryan eyed him but let it go—again. “Sorry I didn’t know what to say back there, about James.”

There it was. “I don’t know what you’re assuming out of all this,” Ryan told him. “But it’d be better not to assume anything. You know what happens when you assume.”

Tan loved to say it, and Roger rolled his eyes. “Ass, you, me, something like that.”

“Right.” Ryan folded his arms. “He’s a damn good business partner. I don’t know what Paul meant, but he’s got a good head on his shoulders.”

“Oh, he’s just gay? I thought he meant...”

*There’s the out I need.* Ryan eyed him. “You’re the one who was calling James gay all day long. And yeah, if you need to know, I am. You wanna go there with me?”

“Nah,” Roger said so fast it almost gave Ryan whiplash. “We’re cool, man. Right?”

“We’re cool,” Ryan muttered, even if he didn’t feel like it. He turned his eyes back to the road, trying not to act stiff. Roger switched to talking about the hockey season so far. He couldn’t wait for lunch and his chat with Tan.

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“I’m not allowed to do what?”

Tan looked apologetic as he sat on the desk, watching Ryan pace. “Only big projects like you’re not doing, as far as I can tell. The non-compete agreement, man, I forgot all about it. Your little sideline project seems totally different.”

Ryan, too, had forgotten that he’d signed one of those when he got offered work here. It was designed to keep a carpenter from moonlighting at one of the other builders around town.

“And you remembered today?”

“When I was going through Roger’s papers,” Tan nodded. “Since he’s got his own thing going now, a lot like you.” He seemed hesitant to bring it up, but he folded his arms. “Are you two competing?”

“What? No,” Ryan scoffed, then sighed and dropped into a chair. “Kind of. He knew I was meeting with the manager of the North Market—heard me talking to Sam that week about it. And he snuck in there earlier to grab the spot I wanted.”

Tan whistled lowly. “Is this going to be a problem?”

“Not for me,” Ryan shook his head. “He’s fucking himself over, man. I know he’s been a no-show at at least half the markets since then.” It wasn’t like he’d intentionally sent spies—at least one his friends seemed to go every week and had insisted on reporting back to him. “He wasn’t ready to open the doors.”

Tan nodded. “I’ve... had word that he’s been talking about you behind your back. Homophobic stuff. You know the kind.”

Ryan nodded. Now, Ryan wasn’t surprised. This morning he might have been. Before his chat with James, he definitely would have been. An asshole, sure, but not a *real* one: that was how he’d seen Roger before. Now he was wondering if Roger was legitimately trying to make his work life shitty. Maybe he wanted Tan to shut down his

business, using the non-compete as his secret weapon.

"I hate this kind of shit," Tan huffed out a sigh, and Ryan nodded. He'd much rather just get on with his work day. "My boss wants me to deal with it now, though. Don't make me haul you both into a meeting—I told him that this morning."

"Before our honeymoon to the hardware store?"

Tan snorted. "Yeah."

*Well, that obviously didn't work.* Ryan wasn't going to tattle and make this shit any harder than it had to be, but he rolled his eyes.

"I've asked him to be free on Saturdays," Tan admitted. "We're going to need him on overtime. And he said he can arrange that."

Ryan nodded. "Right."

"So, between you and me, that stupid farmer's market spot might be open again soon. Now, as far as *this* job goes... I don't want bad blood."

"Right. I can be an adult," Ryan said simply, rising to his feet. "I don't care what he's saying behind my back, all right? Just let me get on with my job." He was done with the conversation, and he sensed Tan just about was, too.

Tan reached out for a quick, firm handshake and clapped his arm. "Good man. Back to it, then."

When he reached the kitchen, Ryan found Sam looking over at him as she held the cabinet in place and Roger sank screws into the wall. He shook his head and she nodded slightly, then returned her attention to the cabinets.

"All he had to tell me," he announced himself once Roger drove the last screw in, "was that I can't build people lofts and shit. And, obviously, I can do it for me, or friends or family, just not advertise it... the non-compete thing."

"Oh," Sam laughed. "Damn."

"I know. I wanted to build lofts *on* people's lofts," Ryan scoffed, and even Roger chuckled. When Roger grinned at him, Ryan smiled back slightly.

*Truce, for now.*

Ryan didn't believe for a second that Roger would never make another

snarky comment, but he had one big advantage: patience. As long as Roger wasn't trying to be an asshole to James, Ryan could ignore pretty much anything he said or did. One of these days, he'd fuck himself over. Ryan wasn't going to speed it up, but he also wasn't going to throw him a lifeline when it happened.

*Can't keep all those balls in the air and try to fuck me over, man.*

Roger could barely handle one thing at a time. If he let go of his grudges and stopped being allergic to hard work, he could be a damn fine woodworker. He could make a lot of money—with this company, on his own, or even both.

Or he could just burn himself to the ground. One way or the other.



James

"I thought shit was gonna go down. I didn't think it'd be *today*." Ryan stared at the market manager's door, then over at James. It was impossible to miss the slight smile of satisfaction on his face.

He'd refused to tell James what happened at the worksite yesterday, but James could guess. They hadn't fought—Ryan was far too calm for that—but if there were ever an excuse... Roger no doubt gave it to him.

They were walking around the market to grab breakfast and check out the competition before they grabbed the cash box from Ryan's house and drove to their craft show. James had spotted an empty table where Roger's little business should be. He'd figured they'd walk over to the office for a word with Angus.

They really shouldn't have been listening in, but it was impossible *not* to hear the raised voices.

"No, I'm not just gonna give up the table." That was Roger's voice, indignant and belligerent. "It's mine. I paid for it. I have a right to use it when I want."

"The agreement is that you come every week. Now, I don't mind you missing a week here and there, but you can't just not show up most of the time. It's not fair to our customers, and it makes us look bad. Customers want to shop. They can't do that if you're not there. And when you do show up, the table's half-empty, and the designs... aren't groundbreaking."

"I can't keep up with demand."

James looked over at Ryan, his heart twisting just slightly with sympathy for Roger.

Angus sounded calm, resigned to Roger's anger. "Other businesses can. Don't burn this bridge."

"Fine. That's fine," Roger snapped. "You wanna deal with those—"

James knew what was coming out of Roger's mouth before he even got to it, but it didn't make the word hurt any less.

“—with those *fags* from Heartwood, or Bleeding Heart, whatever the fuck they call themselves, be my guest.”

James almost saw white. He grabbed Ryan’s arm to march him along the outside of the building, back toward the food stalls set up around the corner.

Ryan resisted for a second before his shoulders sank. Even though Ryan had less to fear from a physical encounter, James didn’t want them alone in the parking lot with the guy.

And honestly, James didn’t want to know what Angus thought—if he’d say *that’s not right* or just shrug and let it go.

“You all right?” That was Ryan, and James realized he hadn’t let go of his arm.

James folded his arms, then nodded jerkily. He felt bad for reacting so much—he hadn’t grown up with it aimed at him, after all. Similar words for girls, but they’d rolled off him as soon as he knew he wasn’t one.

It was only as a teen, when he’d gone from being a tomboy to a pretty boy, that he’d ripped the band-aid off.

Ryan looked calm and steady. James breathed in his energy for a moment, then turned to lean against the building. They could talk here in semi-privacy. “Sorry. I hate hearing that shit.”

“You look more upset than you were when I picked you up.”

James nodded and shrugged. “I dunno. I’ve just had less time to get used to it.”

Ryan’s expression cleared up with understanding. “Ah.” He hesitated for a second, looking back toward the office door, then squeezed James’s arm.

The touch made James let go of the stress he was holding in his shoulders and chest. He cast Ryan a small, appreciative smile. “Guess everyone thinks we’re together.”

“Guess so. You mind it?”

Instantly, James shook his head. Did he mind people thinking this wonderful man was his? Hell fucking no. “You?”

“Well... *I* think...” Ryan hummed. When James straightened up with interest, Ryan pretended to think about it. “It wouldn’t be so bad.”

Before James could ask what exactly Ryan meant, the office door clanged open and gravel scuffed.

It was impossible to miss Roger storming down the parking lot toward them—and not just in their direction, but *for* them.

Before James could even push away from the wall and back up, Ryan had shouldered his way between them, his body tense.

“Ryan,” James hissed. He didn’t want his maybe-about-to-be-boyfriend arrested, even if it was self-defense. And he didn’t need protection.

Well, looking twice at Roger’s clenched fists, he wasn’t so sure about that.

“I know,” Ryan murmured back, casting him a fleeting glance before he looked at Roger again.

“You bastard.” Roger came to a stop in front of Ryan. Good. He was pissed off, but not about to throw punches, hopefully. “Lined up to take my place, no doubt.”

Ryan shook his head. “I didn’t do a thing, man. But I can guess what just happened.”

“I just wanted a *chance*.”

James resisted the urge to comment, *By fucking us over?* He wasn’t going to fuel the fire if he wasn’t ready to deal with the consequences.

“That sucks,” Ryan said simply. “Lucky for you, you talked your way out of the non-compete, didn’t you? When you were letting Tan know I had one, yesterday.”

Roger didn’t disagree, and James sucked in his breath. “Whatever.”

“You’re shitty at little stuff like this anyway,” Ryan scoffed. “I don’t know why you started this business, anyway, except to try to copy what I was about to do. You didn’t have to rip me off.”

“You calling me a bad carpenter?” Roger drew himself up to his full height—a little shorter than Ryan, but stocky.

*Uh oh.*

“No,” Ryan said and shrugged. “You’re the best damn guy we have for interior finishings. You hire out privately on the weekends and you’ll make a killing.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Roger snapped. He was about to shoulder past Ryan when he looked at James, then narrowed his eyes and looked him up

and down.

What the fuck was that look? James stood straighter, unfolding his arms. He had no idea what Roger wanted from him.

"I think you better get to work. Tan'll be waiting for you," Ryan stated.

Roger scoffed again, then strode past them to climb into his truck. He slammed the door so hard the window rattled, and they stood where they were to watch him peel out of the parking lot.

"Jesus. He's got anger problems," James muttered.

Ryan relaxed again, stepping toward him and wrapping his arm around James's shoulders. "Yeah. You all right?"

"I should be asking you that," James shook his head. Ryan had stood up to his pissed-off coworker and competitor without once flinching.

"I'm fine," Ryan said, as if he wouldn't expect anything else. "But are you?"

"I'll be okay," James answered. "Weird moment there, but..."

"Ah. Yes. We went to the hardware store together yesterday—not by choice, believe me—and a Paul was there. The dad of one of your childhood friends."

James's gut clenched. That had to be Tiffany's dad. He was a nice enough guy, but God knew what he'd said. He just hoped it hadn't been that bad.

"He was okay," Ryan hastened to assure him. "He likes you. But he did do the *I knew James before he was James* thing, which got Roger thinking. I think I deflected him into thinking he just meant... when you were young, but..."

James felt a little sick, but he nodded. "Right. Is that what you weren't telling me?"

"Pretty much," Ryan chuckled. His arm was a solid, reassuring weight around James's shoulders. "I didn't want to bother you."

"It's okay," James murmured. He was used to these weird, uncomfortable moments, even if they were rare now that he lived away from his hometown. "So, um, let's grab crepes for breakfast... or something healthier."

"Can you have crepes? No whipped cream?"

"I make an exception for whipped cream on *very* rare occasions."

"Oh?"

"Occasions that involve a hot guy," James drawled. He slid his arm around Ryan's waist for a few moments. They instinctively let go of each other as they rounded the corner to the food stands.

It was worth it to see the look on Ryan's face when he saw what he meant. "Oh, uh. I. That's... I mean." He was usually quiet, but now he seemed even more than usual at a loss for words.

James burst out laughing. "There's canisters of soy whipped cream, you know."

"Right." Ryan's cheeks were bright red. He strode to the crepe stand menu board and stared at it as if willing it not to whisper sexy nothings into his ear.

James's grin almost hurt his face. The only thing that made him stop grinning was approaching Angus's office door a few minutes later. They'd finished their crepes in record time.

"Hey, guys!" Angus welcomed them inside with a smile as soon as they knocked on the open door. "Perfect timing. I was about to call."

"Yeah, we ran into Roger on his way out," James muttered.

Angus winced. "Shit. Everything okay?"

"It's fine," Ryan supplied. "He yelled a bit and ran away."

That broke the air, all three of them laughing before Angus gestured at the seats. "Well, I just found myself with an empty table, and I've been getting requests to see your faces here. Apparently you're the talk of the town."

"From... customers?" James's heart raced. He hadn't expected *that*. "In a good way?"

"From customers who love, and I quote, 'that cute gay couple with the wood stuff'," Angus grinned. "Would Hartwood be interested in setting up shop here weekly?"

Ryan looked at him with wide eyes, seeking permission, and James grinned at his lover and partner. He nodded, letting Ryan answer however he wanted.

"We'd love to," Ryan answered. He shook hands firmly with Angus before James followed suit.

*He's not denying it.*

"Great. We'll get the papers signed now."

Crepes, a farmer's market stall, and Ryan wanting them to be seen as partners. It didn't get any better.

They were nearly at Ryan's place when Ryan finally looked at him, drumming his fingers on the wheel. "So, that's an overhead."

James knew exactly what was coming next: talking about a car again. The more he thought about it, the more he knew Ryan was right. Still, he'd let him say it. "Mmhmm?"

"You're not minding being locked into this?"

That hadn't been what James expected to hear. "Wait, what?"

"Well, you signed that contract, too. Unless you buy out of the business, you're stuck vending with me."

*Stuck...? Wait.*

"You thought I didn't want a car because I didn't want to be tied to the business?" James asked slowly, watching Ryan's reactions as he turned to face him better.

Ryan was watching the road again, looking sheepish. "Something like that."

*Oh. Wait...* "Or you?" James asked. Time to cut the bullshit. If Ryan wanted to be partners with him, he was gonna have to get used to a little bluntness.

"That, too."

That explained why he'd been so weird about James not wanting a car.

Goddamn. James had thought it was him being too much of a wimp to date a man like Ryan. Speaking of men who needed to speak up a little more before assuming. Ryan had something to teach James, too, it seemed.

James reached out to squeeze Ryan's knee, leaving his hand there until Ryan took a quick glance at him to acknowledge him. "I'd love to be."

"Tied to... me? Or the business?"

"Yes." James winked.

Ryan's expression softened, and he silently pulled into his driveway.

They were in the middle of the suburb, but Ryan didn't seem to care. He shut off the car, then pulled James in the second he was unbuckled.

James's knees hit the console, but he laughed against Ryan's lips as he clumsily fell into his lap. Ryan was *never* impulsive like this, and now he was hauling him in, his arms wrapping around James.

And those lips—those hot, firm lips sliding against his, Ryan's head tilting so their noses brushed. Their hands were warm on each other's cheeks. Their chests pressed together as they kissed hard, barely breathing.

James wanted this fucking show to be over *now*. He moaned softly, his chest pounding. He was hard now, rubbing himself against Ryan to grind in a few slow circles that made his whole body burn.

"I think we should head in and grab the cash box," Ryan whispered against James's lips. They were swollen and wet from their rough kisses. Every little warm breath of air sent a shiver through James's body.

"Yeah," James breathed out, easing himself out the driver's side door. He stumbled trying to climb out, but Ryan was right there behind him. Ryan slid his arm around his waist to guide him up the path toward his front door.

They didn't even make it to the couch before Ryan was pressing him up against the wall in the living room. Ryan slid a hand behind his head to cushion the impact as they stumbled together against it.

"Oh, fuck," James moaned around the sound that spilled from his throat. Ryan drew back for a split second, looking concerned. *Too fucking sweet. He thinks he bruised me.* "Tip for the future: that's the noise I make when I really want you."

Ryan lit up with amusement again, pressing up against James once more. He ground their bodies together in smooth, sinuous rolls of his hips. Those hips made wicked promises, and James's knees buckled.

James's heart felt light with joyful arousal. It was a bizarre combination—not one he could remember feeling before. But there was no other way to describe the fact that he wanted to laugh out loud, to grab Ryan and spin with him, but also to fuck him as hard as he could handle.

"I don't know if we have time for me to fuck you the way I *really* want

to,” Ryan breathed out. His voice was a low rumble near James’s ear. “Good and slow, until you’re begging for more.”

The filthy words made James’s dick twitch and his thighs clench, the blood rushing to his face at the same time. His heart pounded. “I’ll take a handjob for now,” he laughed weakly.

“Me too,” Ryan whispered. Those warm lips pressed along his neck from his shoulder up to behind his ear. “For now.”

“For now,” James repeated in a hoarse whisper, grinding once more against Ryan. “And, uh... if you want, we can skip condoms. You know, it’s been a while, testing, blah blah. As long as you’ve been tested, too.”

“Yeah? I have,” Ryan murmured. “Skip them for everything?”

“Yeah. We’ll talk when I’m less desperate for your dick in me,” James laughed, and he was joined by that rich, rolling laugh he so loved to hear.

Fuck, the craft fair. They had to get a move on.

He wasted no time pressing himself against the wall, ripping the buttons open on his jeans. He slid everything—jeans, underwear, harness, packer—down to his knees. Then he grabbed Ryan by the belt loops to kiss him again before doing the same for him, until his hard cock sprang free from his jeans.

God, Ryan was hot. All hard muscles and planes in his body. His touches were confident and hard, not delicate. James loved that. He wasn’t gonna break under a little firm handling, and Ryan respected him enough to know that.

Then, Ryan’s hands, firm as vices, wrapped around his thighs. James barely had time to gasp before he was off the ground, his feet groping at Ryan’s waist to lock around it.

“Oh, my God, yes,” he moaned as loud as he could as that hard cock slotted against his own. The angle took a shift or two to get right, until the base of Ryan’s shaft pressed hard against and over his own throbbing cock. “I love frof. I love it so much.” Fuck, he couldn’t stop talking. He was that turned on.

And Ryan was silent as ever but grinning against his neck—he could just see the crinkle in his eyes.

“Shut up,” James grumbled, then groaned. All Ryan’s weight pressed against that point where their bodies met, against the hard veins in his



shaft and against the hard nub of James's shaft.

And his hips rolled again, thrusting slowly but surely.

It was a good thing James wasn't trying to stand on his own. His whole body weakened and he squirmed with pleasure against the wall. His head rolled back as he gasped for breath.

Those lips never left him alone. The tip of Ryan's tongue trailed from the hollow at the base of his throat up his neck and throat to his jaw. Ryan bit the stubble there, then kissed down the side of his neck, finding every goddamn sensitive spot and kissing it twice.

James was almost shaking, he was so fucking turned on. Each slide of Ryan's shaft between his legs made him grunt and push forward again. Ryan's heart was pounding against his own chest. He tangled his hand in the hair at the back of Ryan's neck, whimpering again as heat flooded him just right. "L-Like that..."

Ryan thrust again. James couldn't bring himself to think of anything except the chiseled body against his, the lips kissing his ear, and the words Ryan whispered.

"—fuckin' *gorgeous*. Jesus Christ, I never knew how fucking hot this is... *you* are."

"Ryan, oh my God." The heat and pressure was almost unbearable in James's body, his legs and arms tensing. His chest heaved for breath. He was just about there, his dick throbbing in rhythm with the rest of him. His hips desperately ground forward against Ryan. "I'm com—Ryan, yes! Fuck!"

James couldn't manage another sound except wordless groans and grunts of pleasure. His hips shuddered and then thrust forward in quick, sharp pushes of need against that thick shaft. His limbs were weak, his weight all against the wall or in Ryan's arms, he couldn't tell which. James could barely tell up from down as climax hit him like a hurricane.

"Oh my God," James mumbled into Ryan's neck when he stopped thrusting, his muscles finally starting to relax. That hard cock was throbbing against him, and holy shit, he wanted to make Ryan feel like this. He fumbled between them, wrapping one arm hard around Ryan's shoulders.

Ryan still wasn't putting him down. He hadn't even broken a sweat at lifting him up like this. Holy shit, that kind of strength was *insanely hot*.

Ryan's cock was trapped between their stomachs, and he wasn't sure grinding would be enough—or fast enough.

"Yes," Ryan hissed when James wrapped his hand around his shaft. Ryan's body shuddered, which was easy to feel while wrapped around him.

He jerked his hand up and down the velvety, thick weight in his hand, still pressing their bodies together and mouthing at Ryan's neck. He only kissed his way up to Ryan's ear. By then, Ryan was hissing for breath, pressing him up against the wall again, groaning his name...

And then Ryan came, nearly crushing him against the wall with his weight and passion. He pushed his hips forward, thrusting through the tight ring of James's fingers. His arms and legs shivered, but between the wall and James's hold on him, James didn't slip more than a little.

It was totally worth it just to feel every fucking *second* of that orgasm shuddering through Ryan's hard body. Ryan gasped for breath against his neck, his back arched, and his nails dug into the curves of James's ass.

James loosened his hold on his cock and stroked lightly once or twice more before letting go, well aware of the hot stickiness along him. He was a mess, and he fucking loved it.

"You can put me down," James said with a grin. He was rewarded with a breathless chuckle. Ryan carefully set him on the ground again, then leaned against the wall so heavily it looked like he was about to slide down it. "That was intense, for handjob."

Ryan's gaze was on him again now, his lips curling into a smile. "Thanks to you, you fuckin' tease. Jesus."

James clicked his tongue, pretending to be offended. "It's not teasing when you come *that* hard."

"Fuck. The show." Ryan didn't even seem to know where to start, so James laughed and pointed him toward the bathroom. He followed after him to wipe himself down, working fast so Ryan wouldn't have to floor it to get there in time.

They were both still grinning a few minutes later. James clutched the cashbox against his legs and Ryan drove them at exactly the limit toward their destination.

"And the answer's yes on the car," James said.

If possible, Ryan's grin widened even more. "You'll let me buy one?"

“Yes,” James sighed. “But we’ll have a strict budget.” He wasn’t going to let Ryan blow their budget in a sneaky attempt to get him in a car.

The warm look Ryan shot him made his chest warm all over again. “No problem. Cheap’s good. If it doesn’t work out, I can pay it off that way for you.”

James raised his eyebrow.

“Not to win you over or anything,” Ryan said firmly, casting him a split-second glance before looking at the road. “But because money exists to make a difference.”

Yeah, that was a good way of looking at it. James half-smiled. “Yeah?”

“I happened to get lucky, you happened to get... less lucky. You shouldn’t have had to get saddled with all that credit card debt in the first place. I know it’s not my duty or anything, but I *want* to do this. I can help make that right.”

James grinned at him. “You could have just said it was for the great orgasm.”

“Cheeky bastard,” Ryan laughed loudly and smacked his knee backhanded. At the next red light, he leaned over for a kiss.

“That’s why you lo—like me.”

“Love you,” Ryan corrected simply.

James felt a little dizzy for a second, the breath whooshing out of him. He drew another breath and pecked Ryan’s lips. “Love you, too. Light’s green. Go.”

“Yes, sir,” Ryan grinned and straightened up again to drive.

Ryan

“How long *have* we been dating?”

Ryan knew the smart thing to do: redirect the question to James, and let him decide how much he wanted to tell his mother.

They’d told *his* mother the truth yesterday over tea—a week now—but James’s mother was trickier.

“Depends when we define it?” James laughed and waved the question off. At least he looked relaxed, even though Ryan knew that wasn’t an indication of how he was really doing.

“I never thought I’d get to meet my baby girl’s boyfriend,” Gretchen was enthusing. Ryan had been biting his tongue all supper. “We thought we had a gay... child. Which is okay, of course. This is all just a surprise.”

James had chosen Jay’s restaurant for this meeting, and Ryan could see why. At least the staff seemed to know James, so they wouldn’t judge him if he snapped at his mother in public.

Now that the food was done, Ryan looked at James for permission to answer that comment. He didn’t want to tread on toes if James wasn’t ready.

James just nodded slightly, his eyes hardening.

“I thought you were an only child,” Ryan said to James, sipping his water.

“I am.”

“Oh, no, it’s just hard to get used to all this,” Gretchen instantly said. She nodded, expecting him to nod along. When he didn’t, she hesitated. “You know.”

“No, actually,” Ryan said, offering a slight smile. “I’ve only ever known James as James. From what I’ve heard, he’s been James since he was a teen.”

“Well, yes, but as his mother...” Gretchen trailed off.

"I don't want to step on any toes here," Ryan said, keeping his voice low. "But it hurts him when you say those things. A lot. I have to put him back together again later and remind him that the rest of the world sees who he really is. Please... for his sake, try."

She was watching him strangely, but Ryan didn't regret a word he'd said. Instead, she looked over at her son for his thoughts on it. "James?"

James blinked a couple times, and Ryan's chest tightened. Had he upset him? Fuck, he'd tried to choose the right words. "Baby?" The pet name had slipped out last week, and James had told him to keep saying it. Now it was first nature.

"I'm okay," James laughed softly, and he took Ryan's hand under the table. "I appreciate that. Yeah, Mom. He's... He's right."

"You never told me."

"I never asked you outright in so many words," James corrected her, and Ryan heard his voice wavering. He held his breath. "Didn't mean you couldn't have seen it."

Gretchen looked conflicted, but her brows were drawing down in a frown. "You don't understand how hard this is on me."

"*You* never saw how hard *you* were on me, Mom," James laughed softly. "So I guess we're even now."

Gretchen flinched. "James... I understand you're feeling defensive."

Ryan's chest was warm with pride. He didn't expect James to cut ties with his family today, or ever. At the same time, he hoped James had a little more courage to say what he had to, even if it was long overdue.

"No, Mom. You are," James told her. "And I get that. You don't know Ryan—haven't known him these last couple months. But he's right. He doesn't always say a lot, but he notices, and that's what matters to me. He sees my reactions to these things, and it... hurt that you never did."

Gretchen's jaw tightened as she looked around—maybe for the waiter. She looked like she was holding back frustration and resentment. Both of them were.

This was an intimate moment of family tension for Ryan to witness, but he couldn't imagine not being there. James was almost crushing his hand, his grip was so tight, his palm sweaty.

Ryan breathed deeply, hoping James would follow suit.

“I understand I could have made fewer mistakes,” Gretchen finally answered when nobody was forthcoming. “I’m not going to change overnight.”

“I never asked you to. Literally everyone else I know except you and Aunt Kay and... half of this side of the family... has seen the light. A decade later, you don’t see me. Will you ever?”

“Oh, James.” Gretchen tried to lean across the table, but James leaned back, and she flinched again.

“I don’t want sympathy. I’m not asking to cry this out, okay? I just want to tell you what I need. If we’re gonna see each other, I *need* to be who I am. I need you to stop throwing all that shit in my face like you still think it’s a phase. And to stop treating it like a victory because I got a man. That doesn’t prove I’m who you thought I was all along.”

Ryan hadn’t missed those remarks, either. He was glad James had said something, because he definitely couldn’t. “Not at all,” Ryan agreed, finally speaking up. “I love him, in part because he’s him, but I was first drawn to him—am still drawn to him—because he’s a man, and I’m gay. It’s just... embarrassing for you to pretend otherwise.”

“I don’t understand it,” James’s mother finally stated, flat-out. “I don’t know if I ever will.”

James’s cheeks were red. He drew a deep breath and let it out. “When you’re ready to try, let me know.” He scooted out of the booth. “I already paid. We gotta get going. Love you, Mom.”

Gretchen stayed seated, looking down at the table for a moment before she met James’s gaze. “I love you, too.”

There was something missing between them. It wasn’t that the words were empty or confrontational. It hurt much more for Ryan to witness because they both seemed to mean it.

Ryan was quiet all the way out to the new car—a cheap old station wagon. It was big enough to put down the back seats and load in lumber, but pretty good on gas, too. And, the most important factor: James liked it.

Once they were inside, he reached out to take James’s hand. “I can drive.”

James’s eyes were wet as he glanced back at Ryan. “No, it’s fine. Give

me a sec.”

“Of course.” Ryan rubbed James’s hand with his thumb, biting back the anger and frustration in his chest. It hurt to see James and know he couldn’t help him. At the same time, it was a conversation they’d been needing to have.

“Thank you for saying all that.”

“Of course,” was all Ryan could murmur. “I can’t believe they don’t see you as the man I love.”

After a long moment, James rubbed his eyes with his wrist, then offered him a shaky smile. “I don’t want to go straight home.”

“Let’s head over to my buddies. They’ll be done the barbecue, but not dessert. I heard Thomas baked a couple apple pies. One of them was vegan. Hopefully they didn’t eat that one yet.”

James gave him a shaky laugh, but a laugh nonetheless. “Apple pie sounds fucking perfect.”

“Five-star rating?” Ryan teased.

James laughed again, his voice steadier as he started up the car. “I don’t know yet. I’ll see.”

It was nice to lean back in the passenger seat and let James do the driving. For one, Ryan got to see a bit more of the town he usually overlooked while driving. And he got to put his hand on James’s knee in moments like these and watch his bright spirit unfurl again, one smile or joke at a time.

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“God, moms can be terrible,” Floyd frowned with a quick glance at Greyson. Behind him, Jackson nodded solemnly.

“Yeah,” James sighed. He’d just recounted the whole story. Ryan had never been more grateful to his friends for listening and getting it. “My family could accept me being gay, but not trans. Apparently that’s a step too far.”

“On the bright side,” Cam spoke up, handing over a beer, “we have a dozen more of these.”

That lifted the mood enough for James to laugh, and the rest of them chuckled, too.

“Also, a guest suite if you two wanna stay here for Christmas.”

Thomas nodded. “We can let Santa know to expect two more.”

Whoa. Even Ryan just about fell off his perch on the footstool near the chair James had claimed. “Wh-What?” They hadn’t hinted that this invitation was coming.

“Assuming you don’t make plans with your parents,” Noah nodded at him. “We’re probably all gonna have a little thing on Christmas Eve here, together. Then Christmas Day, I know Cam’s parents—the Riley parents—want to see them and us. They invited anyone else we want to come along. Floyd, your parents are seeing you two, right?”

“Yeah, and Kevin and Matty will be in town, but their parents wanna see them, etc, etc,” Jackson waved his hand. “But the point is, Christmas Eve together here. You can come along to our parents if your parents aren’t around for Christmas, Ryan.”

Ryan’s chest was warm with the invitation. He jerked his chin in a quick nod. From how readily his mother had taken to his new boyfriend, they’d kill him if he snuck off to the Rileys’ for the holiday, but the offer meant a lot to him. And, he suspected, even more to James.

“Thanks,” James nodded. Ryan knew that look on his face—trying to keep it cool.

“And any other holiday,” Chase added. “They’ve been more than kind to me, since I don’t... exactly have anyone else either.”

James looked startled as he glanced over to Chase. He hadn’t been around when Chase’s family tried to chase him down and beat the Bible back into him, but Ryan remembered it well. “Oh. Shit. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s okay,” Chase smiled slightly.

“And his mom’s not exactly a barrel of fun,” Floyd jerked his chin at Greyson, rubbing his arms. “But we make sure everyone’s got a place for holiday dinners that are way less shitty than ever before.”

“Can’t promise there won’t be bad jokes and really awful cranberry sauce,” Alex shook his head.

Thomas gasped, straightening up and pointing his bottle at Alex. “You said you liked my cranberry sauce!”

It was an undertone, but everyone heard it from Jackson as he rose to his feet. “*Ohshit.*”



Even Thomas laughed. “We’re having that out later,” he informed Alex and looked back at James. “My cranberry sauce is just fine.”

“No doubt it is,” James agreed solemnly, then cracked up with the rest of them.

Ryan scooted his footstool back a little until he was beside James’s chair. He wrapped an arm around James as conversation drifted to what tofu turkey tasted like. When he rubbed James’s back, James’s eyes nearly closed and he leaned into him.

Not an ounce of tension there.

James was starting to realize what Ryan was determined to ensure: no matter how things went with his family, everything was going to be okay for him.

Not just for him... for both of them, together.

“Love you,” James whispered, so softly it was for Ryan’s ears alone.

Ryan pressed his lips into James’s hair and echoed the words. He let himself get lost in the moment before they realized someone was trying to talk to them.

“And our last set of lovebirds over here have no opinion on stuffing. Well, I’m sure they do, but...” Noah clicked his tongue innocently.

Though he blushed, Ryan was grinning, too. “I like it. James?”

“Mmhmm.”

As conversation turned to hockey, politics, and local festivals, Ryan shifted to share the chair with James. He was happy just to have his arm around James for hours on end. It was James who had to finally suggest they get going before it was too late.

The look in James’s eyes as they headed for the car made a little shiver run down Ryan’s spine. In the last week, since that frantic encounter against the wall, they’d made out more than ever before. They hadn’t had a spare evening without the business interrupting them.

Not until now.

“You don’t have to be in *too* early, do you?”

“Nope,” Ryan confirmed. Even if he had, he wouldn’t have cared.

“Perfect,” James smiled. “I’ll bring you home, then.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

James

"Oh, man. I can't believe we ever thought we should keep business and romance separate." James grinned at Ryan as he held the door for him, then kicked off his shoes. "That was a terrible idea."

Ryan laughed. "It's a good idea. Just not for us."

"Shh. I don't want to hear sense."

Ryan pretended to zip his lips, and James laughed. Once their coats and shoes were off, he approached Ryan and slid his arms around his waist, stretching up onto his tiptoes to kiss him.

"So, was that pie a five-star rating?" Ryan grinned, pecking his lips.

James clicked his tongue. "Definitely. You know what else is?"

"Mmm?" Ryan's grin grew. It was hard to kiss him when he was grinning, so James scowled at him until he relented. "Sorry."

"Better." James kissed his lower lip, then gently sucked it between his own and flicked his tongue along it. "I was going to say your friends are."

"Our friends," Ryan corrected, smiling warmly at him.

James smiled even more. All the guys had been completely chill with him from the beginning, and that was rare in a group this size.

Not all of them were touchy-feely—Chase, Noah, Thomas, and maybe Greyson had listened to his story about his mom closely. All of them looked the most sympathetic. The others didn't wear their hearts on their sleeves quite so freely. He could tell they didn't want him crying on their shoulders or anything. But they'd passed him the beer and told jokes to cheer him up, and that counted for just as much.

Welcoming him into their holiday meals was really sweet. His dad was going to be away, and he didn't want to see his mom without Ryan around for the time being. He hadn't known how to bring that up with Ryan, but they'd saved him the awkwardness.

"Our friends," James agreed, swaying on his feet with Ryan for a moment. "Let's lie down."

“Mmhhh.” Ryan steered him toward the bedroom with his arm firmly around James’s waist. James resisted the urge to lean into him too heavily.

He loved it when Ryan pushed him around a little—especially when that meant lifting him off the ground, like last weekend.

Christ, that had been the hottest thing ever.

That thought led him to another: they finally had an evening together, and every time they brushed, there was still that spark of chemistry.

The moment they collapsed together on the bed, Ryan pulled James in against him, then on top of him. Ryan’s hand gently ran down his back to rest in the small of his back. James braced himself with his arms above Ryan’s head and kissed him.

Even making out with Ryan was fucking hot. He kissed slow and dirty, with tongue, and touched James while he did it. His hands were always wandering up James’s sides, his fingers trailing along his ribs or up his spine, or rubbing James’s chest, cupping his cheeks, touching his hair...

Everywhere Ryan touched, James’s skin tingled with pleasure. “I think we never got around to what you were promising me,” James murmured. His back rippled as Ryan cupped the back of his neck.

“I think you’re right.”

“We should fix that,” James grinned.

Ryan nipped his lip. “Mmmm. Does that mean I get to undress you?”

“Oh, yeah,” James laughed, raising his hands as Ryan peeled his collared plaid shirt off, then his t-shirt. By the time Ryan’s hands fell to his waistband, he was already prickling with pleasure and heat. He had to resist the urge to shove his lover’s hands away so he could do it faster.

“This would be easier if I just had you...” Ryan grabbed his hip and shoulder. They flipped over, James’s head in the pillows as Ryan blanketed him.

James laughed with surprise and squirmed. “Probably.” He kicked his legs when Ryan stripped his jeans off, then moaned. Ryan’s hands slowly ran up his shins, over his knees, up his thighs.

“I love your body hair,” Ryan murmured. “And your stubble. And your treasure trail...” He leaned down to kiss the inside of James’s thigh. “And that cock. It’s intriguing.”

“How so?” James grinned, biting his lip as Ryan stripped off his boxers.

Ryan wrapped his hand around the shaft, stroking his hand to the base and grinding it into James’s body to rub his cock under it. He’d got the knack of it almost instantly. James couldn’t overstate how much he appreciated that.

“Fuck,” James breathed out, almost forgetting his own question.

“Because I wonder what it’d feel like to have you take charge,” Ryan grinned.

James shivered. “Oh, God, yeah. Say the word. But next time.”

“Next time?” Ryan laughed.

“Goddamn it, Ryan,” James sighed dramatically. “I have been waiting to get your cock in me since you hit on me at that art auction. I am *not* going to let you get away.”

Ryan’s laugh rolled around the bedroom, his hands pausing for a second as he shrugged off his shirt and tossed it aside. “All right. As you wish.”

Christ, that barrel chest, the muscles rippling from his shoulders down to his wrists, and lining every inch of his torso... His pecs, especially. They were so kissable.

James stared hungrily, not even making it subtle. He loved Ryan’s body, and he wanted it on him.

“So, do we need a condom, or...?”

James grinned. “No. My doctors say pregnancy’s really unlikely unless I stop T for a while.”

“Oh.” Ryan grinned. “Cool. So you don’t mind.”

“I want to try without it,” James said. “I haven’t before.”

“Never?”

James shook his head. He watched Ryan yank his jeans and underwear off, bracing himself, until he was naked. God, he was distractingly hot. “Didn’t want the risk.”

“I get it. I only did with... my last ex,” Ryan murmured. “If you want to, I do.” Ryan pressed a quick kiss to his lips.

James braced his feet and buckled against Ryan, pulling his harness

down and off. He was so going to take Ryan up on his confession of curiosity later, but for now...

“And, uh, which...?”

James laughed at Ryan’s expression as he furrowed his brow, trying to figure out how to ask the question. “Either. Let’s start with what you’re used to.”

“Deal,” Ryan murmured, pressing his lips against James’s again. His body blanketed James’s. He was grinding down in that slow, sensual rhythm, his cock rubbing James’s. They both hardened with arousal. Just having warm skin on skin, Ryan’s lips trailing along his jaw, was enough.

“I can feel you getting hard,” Ryan breathed out, his eyes wide. “Fuck.”

“Hot?” James teased.

“Fucking hot,” Ryan agreed.

James smirked. He reached between them to drag Ryan’s hand to his dick. He guided him into pinching it between two fingers and a thumb. He bucked his hips into the touch while he wrapped his hand around Ryan’s cock. “Nnh, like that.”

They stroked each other slowly at first, exchanging long, slow open-mouthed kisses. Ryan’s other hand cupped his cheek, then ran down his chest to tweak his nipples.

The electric jolts that ran through his body were hard to explain. Ryan had figured out exactly how to play with them to get him to react. He moaned with pleasure through their kiss. “Speaking of a tease.”

“It’s not a tease if you come afterward,” Ryan whispered against his lips with a wicked smile. He tightened his grip on James’s cock and tugged a few more times before he let go.

“Fffuck,” James whispered, his lips catching on his lower lip as he tried to catch his breath. “You’re a bad man.” He ran his thumb over the tip of Ryan’s hard cock, then stroked his hand down the thick shaft. “Lube’s over there.”

“Terrible,” Ryan agreed. He grabbed it and grinned, squirting it across his fingers.

James spread his legs, then gasped when wet fingers slid inside him. It made his skin prickle with pleasure, the hair standing on the back of his neck. “Oh, *fuck*.”

“You all right?”

“Impatient, but yeah,” James retorted.

Ryan chuckled deeply and crooked his fingers inside him, pushing his fingers inside a few more times before he pulled them out.

“Nnh. For future reference, it still feels good to me, even if I don’t have a prostate,” James grinned.

“Noted,” Ryan murmured.

James pulled him in for a long, slow kiss before wrapping his legs around his waist. The thick warmth pressing against him, then into him, made him shiver with pleasure.

Ryan echoed his groan, kissing him a couple times as he slid gradually in, inch by inch. He pulled his hips back for a quick thrust or two.

“Oh, fuck, yes.” James’s heart pounded at the feeling. Not quite like anything he’d felt before. More intimate than before, not because they were bareback, but because it was *Ryan* inside him.

The thought made his skin prickle all over again—or maybe that was the next thrust of Ryan’s hips as his hardened hand closed around James’s hip. He braced himself on his elbows and knees.

James moaned his encouragement and kissed Ryan hard. He wanted to tempt him to speed up his pace as he thrust their bodies together. Ryan’s cheeks were red, his hair wild, his eyes utterly attentive to James’s every facial expression.

Best of all was that thick cock plunging into him, and the scrape of his own cock against Ryan’s washboard stomach. His foreskin dulled sensation enough to tease the crap out of him. Being stretched and filled for the first time in so fucking long was beyond comparison.

He was gonna have to schedule time for sex now, wasn’t he?

Ryan was out of breath and moaning into his mouth. James had the distinct feeling he wasn’t going to be far behind. He squirmed until he got a hand around his own thigh and between them, jerking himself hard as Ryan pushed into him.

The bed thumped against the wall with each lurch of their bodies, James’s head slipping off the pillows. Ryan just kissed him harder and teased his nipple by circling his finger around it. James’s whole body burned with pure, simple *need*.

“I’m gonna come,” James whimpered when he felt his body drawing

tight. Pleasure jolted through him, and his body tightened involuntarily around that thick cock inside him. He tightened his fingers around himself and groaned when he felt a fingertip brushing over a nipple. Ryan's lips slid along his open mouth as his tongue teased the tip of James's.

James's whole body shuddered, tightening until he couldn't breathe. He came in a wave of white-hot pleasure that ripped a cry from his throat. "Yes! Ryan! Ohhhh," he groaned, his chest heaving as he bucked against Ryan's solid body. Their chests rubbed as he clenched around that hard cock, squeezing his eyes shut.

It was like nothing else when he felt Ryan coming, too—inside him, even as he clenched and shuddered and thrust up into his own hand.

"Ohhhh, yes," Ryan growled in his ear, thrusting hard and burying himself deep inside with each squirt and shudder of his cock. His expression was taut with pleasure, that hard body rippling and clenching all around, over, and in him.

Sweaty and kissed to heaven and back, James felt wet all over in the best fuckin' ways as Ryan slid out of him.

"Oh my God, that was the best sex of my life," James moaned. He didn't feel shy about admitting it.

Ryan grinned and mouthed at his jaw, even though his eyes were hazy and his body still twitched and shivered. "Me, too, baby."

James loved the nickname. He rubbed Ryan's back as he dropped his feet to the mattress again, then hauled him in to hug him as hard as he could.

Ryan rolled onto his side and tucked James against his front, grabbing the pillows for them to be a little more comfortable. Then, James closed his eyes and let Ryan kiss him slowly, over and over, until their bodies cooled.

James's chest was impossibly warm. He'd always thought it was dumb to say things like this in the heat of the moment, but suddenly, he understood why people did it.

He couldn't wait a single second to tell Ryan. "I really love you."

He opened his eyes to peek at Ryan's response.

Ryan was smiling, his eyes half-open, his finger lightly brushing down Ryan's side from shoulder to hip. "I love you, too, James. Like I said before... I'm glad I chose you."



“As your business partner, or as your boyfriend?” James smiled, running his hand up to Ryan’s cheek to peck his lips again.

Ryan pressed his lips against the tip of James’s nose, then his forehead. He whispered, “Yes.”

As his energy drained away, his eyelids sliding closed, Ryan’s body was warm under his hands. James’s nose was filled with the scent of him, his lips tasted of him, and Ryan’s deep breaths broke the contented silence.

James was the luckiest man alive.

## Epilogue

Two months later

“Do you want more punch?”

James giggled as he leaned into Ryan’s side, his eyes half-closed. “I think I’m good on punch,” he assured his boyfriend.

The sheer curtains were pulled across the sliding glass doors that formed a walkout from Cam and Noah’s guest suite to the shared backyard. It was easy to imagine the dark night and gently-drifting snow outside, though. Christmas had come with snow, as usual, and the only reason James didn’t mind it was because he didn’t have to go outside in it.

That, and it was kind of romantic in moments like this.

Christmas Eve had been one of the best in his life. All of their friends—even Kevin and Matty, whom he’d met in person for the first time when they flew in from Toronto yesterday—had gathered at Cam’s place. They’d swapped gifts, drank a lot of beer, and watched Christmas movies until midnight.

And then Jackson had got down on one knee by the Christmas tree, “found” one more present under it, and proposed to Chase. Chase cried as he said yes, the rest of them whooping and hollering with surprise and delight. Jackson hadn’t breathed a word of his intentions to any of them beforehand. Alex had dropped a few hints that he’d been thinking about it himself lately. Apparently, they’d all have to keep waiting for that moment.

After celebrating *that*, they’d all made their way home. Floyd and Greyson went back to their place, Kevin and Matty to a hotel despite the offer of a guest room in one of their houses. Ryan and James came here, to the guest suite in Cam’s house.

“I almost forgot this is my first Christmas away from my parents,” James admitted at last, resting his head on Ryan’s shoulder.

“Mm?” Ryan murmured. “Well, we’re off to mine tomorrow.”

“I know,” James assured him with a chuckle. Ryan was no doubt worried about him, especially after hearing that. “It’s fine, though. It’s bittersweet, but it’s... it’s okay.”

Ryan had liked his dad from the moment they were introduced. They didn't see him, or Anna, as much as they'd like, but James wasn't alone. With the Rileys having his back, he never would be. Plus, Ryan's parents were nice. Boring, Ryan always said, but James liked them.

Things had been hard with his mom's side of the family. They might get better—he didn't know yet. Ryan had had his own trouble at work with Roger being a dick now and then. It didn't bother the unflappable man, and Tan was firmly on his side, so Roger had let it go. James trusted that somehow, things would work out for the best. With his credit card paid off, James was less stressed about everything.

He pressed his lips into Ryan's shoulder, and Ryan squeezed him into his side.

"I'm glad you're doing okay," Ryan murmured. "Shall we get to bed? We have a lot of Christmas dinner to eat tomorrow."

"And gifts to open, and snow angels to make..." James teased.

"I'm not making snow angels."

James giggled. "What if I push you into the snow and make them around you?" He pulled back the covers, tucking himself against Ryan's front and letting Ryan drape his arm around him to pull him close.

"We'll see," Ryan grunted.

James was totally gonna make him make snow angels.

As he closed his eyes, his heart glowed with joy. Everything was perfect: the scents of wood fire, sugar cookies, and pine; the warm weight of a strong arm around his chest; but most of all, the sound of Ryan's steady breathing beside him.

"Merry Christmas, Ryan," James whispered.

He thought Ryan was asleep, but he heard a sleepy chuckle from behind him. Ryan's arm tightened for a moment. "Merry Christmas, love."

He didn't have all the answers, but he didn't have to have them yet. Neither did Ryan, or any of these Rileys who had taken him in—both blood-related and those bonded by love and friendship.

Together, they could live, love, and be happy. No matter what had happened yesterday, today could always bring a smile, and tomorrow

would always be a bright, new, beautiful day.

“Boo”

## Noah

“Daddy! Dad said we’re ready!”

“Come on down, sweetheart.” Noah beamed to himself as he adjusted his wings. “Remember to hold the railing!”

He itched to take hold of the girls’ hands as they headed downstairs, but the twins were nearly four years old now. They could handle the stairs.

Still, Noah headed to the bottom of the stairs to keep an eye on them while Cam got his Halloween costume on upstairs.

Oh, his heart flip-flopped when the girls came to the top of the stairs.

They’d adopted Harper and Charlotte just six months ago, after years of training, interviews, record checks, home assessments, and more. Since then, their lives had turned upside-down in the best way possible.

Charlotte walked downstairs first, her ladybug antennae bobbling out of place on her head. Harper was close behind, pulling the hoodie of her little cow costume over her head.

Cameron and Noah had helped them choose their costumes, and neither of them had expected Harper to choose a cow outfit. They’d decided from the beginning to encourage them in whatever they wanted to do that didn’t hurt anyone else, though. If Harper wanted to be a cow, she could be a cow.

“Are you ready for your first Halloween? Look at you both!” Noah nearly squealed. He fixed Charlotte’s antennae, then took each of their hands as they reached the bottom of the stairs.

As Noah led his daughters to the living room, Charlotte giggled and skipped, trying to hang from his hand. She was getting big, though. She nearly pulled his arm out of the socket these days. Luckily, Harper walked calmly on his other side.

“Let me get a look at you,” Noah told them and let go, grinning as he folded his arms. “Do you know what I am?”

The black wings on his back and bobbling antennae of his own made it obvious, if his black sweater and yellow leggings didn't.

"The queen bee!" They spoke in unison, but Charlotte was louder, as always.

"That's right," Noah agreed and grinned. "And you make the perfect ladybug and cow. What do you think your dad's up to, huh?"

They giggled before Charlotte shushed Harper and whispered too loudly, "He said not to tell Daddy!"

"Oh, he's shown you, hasn't he?" Another burst of giggles confirmed it. "Well, he kept it all a secret from me!" Noah shook his head, pretending to be sad. "He's sneaky, your dad."

Noise from upstairs made him look up. "I think we're about to see, though..."

The scraping sound of something against the wall made Noah wince but he shrugged it off. Since the girls came into their lives, there were a lot more paint touch-ups needed.

At first, he wasn't sure what he was seeing. Cam came downstairs with his back turned, shuffling sideways and ducking to fit on the staircase with whatever was strapped to his back.

"What on earth?" Noah folded his arms and waited for Cam to turn around.

When he did, Noah just stared at him for a few long moments before he burst out laughing. "No."

"Yep," Cam said, spreading his arms. "I'm your honey."

He'd attached a giant cardboard cutout of a bear, like the plastic honey bears sold in grocery stores, to his back. It even had a fake label when he turned around to let Noah see the back of it properly—*Noah's Own*.

The giggling fit that struck Noah made it hard to breathe. He sank onto the arm of the couch as he started to laugh, covering his mouth. His wings bounced behind him as his body shook with laughter, and the girls squealed with laughter, prompted by him as much as Cam's outfit.

"I think it's a great costume," Cam defended himself. "I worked on it for weeks!"

Noah managed to catch his breath long enough to wheeze, "It's

amazing, baby.” As soon as he looked at Cam again, looming in the living room doorway with a giant cardboard bear cutout strapped to his back, he lost it again.

Cam huffed, but he was clearly holding back his own laughter. “Well, the girls are going to get all the attention anyway. Look at them! And they’re all ready to go. Are we?”

Once he wiped the tears from his eyes and cleared his throat, Noah walked over to Cam and kissed his cheek. “You’re right. I’m ready.”

“I’m *barely* ready,” Cam said with a pleased grin.

Noah clapped a hand over his mouth before he could laugh again, then groaned at the pun. “Just because you’re a dad now doesn’t mean you need to get the dad jokes out.”

“Yes, it does. Perks of the job,” Cam retorted. “Besides, I’ve been sitting on that one for weeks. Come on, Harper, Charlotte. Do you have your mittens? Are you going to be warm enough in that?”

Noah let Cam fuss over them, but he had to help them into their winter boots since Cam couldn’t sit down to do it.

“I didn’t really think that part through,” Cam admitted, sidling out the door carefully so he didn’t take out any of the Halloween decorations.

The six guys living in these three houses—Cam and Noah, Jackson and Chase, and Thomas and Alex—had spent a week decorating their front lawns for Halloween. They’d finally figured out a way to build a tunnel up the middle driveway with a sign up explaining the trick-or-treaters’ options.

They could choose one of the three houses to visit—silly, scary, or terror.

Noah and Cam had called dibs on the silly Halloween decorations, so they had plastic pumpkins and cartoon witches and the like on the way to their door.

The scary option was Thomas and Alex, who had creaking porch boards, an animatronic witch, and a spider that dropped down from above.

Jackson and Chase had refused to give anyone the secret of what they were doing to scare trick-or-treaters who chose the terror option. All Noah knew was that they’d arranged for them to bring the girls over early, so Harper and Charlotte didn’t get scared by whatever they had planned.



After the obligatory photos, and after Charlotte started dancing on the spot and complaining that she was bored and *could we go now*, Noah led them out the door and down the steps.

Harper tugged on Noah's hand as they walked across the lawn toward his brothers' houses. "D'you think our uncles will laugh at me?"

"No, honey," Noah assured her, squeezing her hand as he smiled. "You look great. I love that you chose something that you love."

"Cows are nice. They play games with people on the internet. And they have friends," Harper muttered, but Noah got the feeling she was talking to herself. He had no idea where she'd gotten her facts, but she was probably right. Already, she was clearly developing into a bookworm.

"That's right," Noah said, looking at Charlotte as she launched herself up the steps. "Watch out. Don't trip. You girls hold hands now and knock, okay?"

When the door opened, they both chimed in, "Hi!"

Jackson and Chase stood there, waiting expectantly. Chase looked like he was trying not to squeal, and Jackson was beaming too. Jackson looked over his shoulder. "Guys! They're here!"

*Oh my God, they don't even know what to say yet!* Noah clapped a hand over his mouth so he didn't laugh and glanced at Cam.

His husband had this one covered. He stepped toward them. "Now, when the door opens, you both say *Trick or treat*, okay? You want to give it a try?"

"Trick or treat!"

"That's right!" Jackson approved, kneeling to distribute fistfuls of candy to them both. "Don't you both look great! Now, what on earth are your daddies dressed as?"

James and Ryan appeared, both instantly wearing the same grins. All of the guys spoiled their new nieces rotten, and since then, Noah had overheard more than one of their friends testing the waters with their partner about adopting, too.

"A bee and his honey!" Charlotte announced. She twirled on the spot, nearly falling over, clearly wanting all the attention for herself. "Do you like it?"

"You're a great ladybug!" Chase agreed, grinning as he knelt and hugged her. "And Harper must be a cow. Udderly adorable. Get it?"

As Harper giggled, Cam sighed. “Darn it,” he muttered. “I was saving that joke for later.”

“Oh, no. I’ll get you a dad joke book, if you’re struggling,” Noah murmured back.

Jackson straightened up to stare at his brother. Cam stuck out his tongue, but Jackson was already cracking up. “Are you—man, are you a honey bear?”

Cam turned around so they could see the label. “Noah’s Own.”

Jackson howled with laughter, and Cam stuck out his tongue again. “We’re going now. James, Ryan, thanks for helping out.”

Their friends had volunteered to man Cam and Noah’s part of the haunted house while they were trick-or-treating with the girls.

“No problem,” James managed to keep a straight face, but only just.

Harper and Charlotte finished comparing the candy in their little plastic pumpkins, and called out, “Bye!” They came back to rejoin their dads.

Before Noah could remind them, the girls remembered their manners and called out thank-yous before scampering off to Thomas and Alex’s house next.

It went much the same at this place, with the added bonus of Thomas teasing his brother for turning into a bear so early in life.

“Just for the day,” Cam insisted, patting his belly. “I’ve never been in such good shape.”

“I don’t know,” Alex smiled as he leaned in the doorway. “Noah’s cooking is getting pretty good.”

“Next house?” Charlotte tugged eagerly on Noah’s hand, ignoring her uncles’ banter.

“Let’s go,” Noah agreed. He smiled and waved at Thomas and Alex.

They could catch up later, at one of their regular family suppers. This time of year, their shared backyard barbecues were pretty much over, but they took the party indoors instead.

Noah peeked in the girls’ buckets and gasped. “We’ll have to stop at home and empty those out! I think your uncles gave you all the candy they had!”

They giggled, but nothing would stop the impatience. Cam tuned into

it, luckily, and waved goodbye to his brother and brother-in-law as they headed off to the first neighboring house.

As they walked up to the door, Noah gave them the safety lecture for the dozenth time that week—hold hands, stay on the sidewalk and stay close, look out for cars.

“And every time they give you candy, what do you say?”

“Thank you!” They were impatient to scamper along the narrow porch that skirted the side of the house toward the next house’s illuminated side door, now that they had the hang of it.

“Good,” Noah praised. He let go of their hands and smiled, watching them take off. “No running on slippery porches,” he called after them, for all the good it would do.

Behind him, all he heard was a quiet, “Oh, no.”

When Noah turned, he saw the source of Cam’s distress, and he started to laugh again. Cam had to walk sideways to fit along the porch without bending one of the honey bear’s arms. His husband looked so resigned to his fate, too.

“It’s okay,” Noah managed, waving at Cam to stop. “We can wait here for them.”

Their neighbors, who had just moved in, knew their daughters by now. Noah listened in to the reaction when the door opened and the girls remembered to say “Trick or treat!”

“Aww! What do we have? A ladybug and a... a cow?”

“A cow,” Harper echoed, her stubbornness making Noah smile at Cam. She had a lot of Cam’s traits, really. That quiet determination was endearing.

House by house, they worked their way along the street. Finally, Noah started to let go of their hands and let them walk alone. He and Cam stayed close behind them, though, holding hands just like the girls were.

It was a good thing they’d waited a few years to adopt, until they were sure Cam’s heart could take physical exertion without any trouble. It was all the two of them could do to keep up with their daughters most days.

“Do you like my costume, though?” Cam asked, his gaze searching Noah’s as they waited for the girls to collect their candy and come back to the sidewalk.

It would take a minute, since Charlotte was spinning around to make her wings flap and collect as much attention as possible. Noah fought back a grin. If Harper was like Cam, then Charlotte took after Noah and then some.

Noah turned his attention back to Cam and beamed at him. It was so easy to read his husband these days—they barely needed words. “I love that you thought of it,” he admitted. “It’s sweet. There. That’s my pun for tonight.”

However impractical it was, Cam had put a lot of effort into finding a huge piece of cardboard and cutting it out, figuring out a way to attach it to himself, and even hand-drawing that label.

Cam laughed and leaned in to kiss him. “Phew. I haven’t scared you off, then. You’re such a gorgeous, sexy queen bee with that little black mask, and I’m... um...”

“My big, strong honey,” Noah instantly finished his sentence, beaming at him. “And I’ll treat my honey later,” he promised.

With that promise to keep Cam’s mind busy, Noah breathed a happy sigh and watched their daughters running back to them.

With a husband like Cam, and daughters like Harper and Charlotte, and family like the whole Riley clan... he was blessed beyond what he’d ever thought possible. No cosmic tricks here—just treats.

## Cam

In the years since Cam's recovery from heart surgery, he and Noah had more than made up for their first few months of having to be careful in bed.

Good thing, too. Most nights since their daughters came into their life, neither of them had the energy for much more than a kiss and cuddle. Tonight, though, Noah made his intentions clear with a wink here and a sideways glance there.

All the excitement and exercise tuckered out the little ones. By the time they were home, it didn't take long for the sugar high to wear off. To Cam's relief, Harper and Charlotte fell fast asleep within minutes of being tucked in.

"Whew," Noah breathed out as he followed Cam through the hall to their own bedroom. "That was a night to remember."

Cam beamed once more. His cheeks hurt from smiling, and he'd snuck a million photos in, whenever they were standing still long enough. "It was a great first Halloween with them," he agreed.

"And I love that you decided to be my honey," Noah told him, closing the door and locking it with a roguish wink. He lowered his head, peeping through his lashes and wiggling his body to make his wings shake.

Cam grinned. Though he'd struggled his way out of the strings he'd used to attach the cardboard bear to himself, Noah had left on his outfit. "Oh? Are you going to gather me up?"

"I'll do even better than that," Noah announced. "I've been keeping secrets of my own."

"Oh?" Cam headed for the bed and sat on the edge of it, but Noah wasn't far behind.

At the last minute, he veered away to open the bedside drawer. "This," he said, taking out a jar of something powdery. "That's my secret."

When he turned the label toward Cam, it all made sense: powdered

honey. Cam had heard of it before, but he'd never tried dehydrating his own hives' honey to make it.

Cam grinned. "Oh, wow. Are you... *oh*." Noah had just licked his lips and winked, making his intentions clear. "Oh, I see."

Spilling honey in bed had ended quite badly before, but the powdered stuff? The possibilities were suddenly endless.

"Get naked," Noah ordered Cam. "*Then* you'll see."

Cam beamed and obeyed, standing up first. He peeled his shirt and jeans off while swaying around, hoping for a hypnotic effect.

"You might have a new career if you keep that strip show up," Noah said with a wink, sitting on the edge of the bed to enjoy the show.

Cam stepped out of his underwear and peeked over his shoulder at Noah as he kicked it aside. "You think?"

Noah's gaze was just where he'd hoped it would be. He sounded mesmerized as he murmured, "Only one place left to stick my loonies."

Cam burst out laughing and turned around, one hand over his growing hardness. He flexed his muscles for Noah's benefit.

"Come here and let me at you," Noah begged, stretching out his hand and crooking his index finger.

Cam caught his hand and raised it to his mouth, not breaking eye contact as he sucked the tip of Noah's finger into his mouth.

"Oh!" Noah giggled, but his cheeks were flushed and there was a distinct tent in the front of his yellow striped leggings. He

It amazed Cam how every morning, he still woke up feeling thankful to have Noah by his side. Even when his husband laughed at his predicaments, hearing that musical voice never failed to make him smile.

Noah beamed at him. "You're having all kinds of feelings, aren't you? Come here," he whispered, cupping the back of Cam's neck and pulling him in.

Cam went easily, kneeling on the bed on either side of Noah's lap and kissing him. With Noah's arms wrapped around him, the world was as it should be.

"Hnnh. How are you so perfect?" Cam murmured.

“Oh, stop.” Noah turned his head aside and laughed as he shoved Cam’s chest, his breath warm on Cam’s skin. Cam just kissed Noah’s blush away.

“Never,” Cam promised. “I’ll never stop telling you how special you are.”

Noah shoved his chest again, harder this time, and Cam let him push him onto his feet. “Then I should return the favor. Get on the bed,” Noah ordered, grinning at him. “On your back.”

“Prone is the best way to receive a compliment,” Cam agreed. He scooted along the bed until his head rested on the pillows and he could fold his hands behind his back.

Noah giggled and crawled over Cam, his wings wiggling all the way. It made Cam burst out laughing before he clapped a hand over his mouth at Noah’s reproachful look.

“Don’t disrespect the queen bee,” Noah declared, the jar of honey powder in one hand.

Cam did his utmost to contain the giggles as one of Noah’s springy antennae kept waving back and forth. “I would never.”

Noah stuck out his tongue and popped open the jar. Cam’s laughter turned into a gasp as he sprinkled some across Cam’s chest, and then leaned down to lick it off him. The warm, wet trail of Noah’s tongue ignited nerves under his skin he’d almost forgotten about, and suddenly he needed Noah like air.

“That’s better,” Noah approved when Cam was stifling moans instead of laughter. He grinned wickedly up at him. “And I have so much more planned.”

Those nimble fingers pinched more of the powdery stuff, making a trail from Cam’s collarbone up his throat.

Cam tipped his head back and gulped. Then, he squeaked as Noah dove in and his antenna nearly went in his eye. “No eye injuries, please!”

“Oh, sorry.” Noah whipped off the headband and tossed it aside, grinning up at him. “The only eye injuries I’m planning are cum-related.”

Cam’s mouth opened and closed for a moment. “Yeah?”

Noah licked his lips meaningfully before he returned to teasing Cam, licking both nipples and his stomach.

Fuck, it was hard to hold back. Cam just wanted to roll him over, rip those tights off, and fuck his sassy little ass hard and fast.

Noah's mouth closed around the tip of his throbbing hardness. He sucked the length into his mouth hard and fast, slamming his mouth to the bottom of the shaft without hesitation.

"Nnnh!" Enveloped by the wet heat, Cam dug his fingers into the sheets, twisting hard as he bit his lip.

Noah's fingers grazed up from his stomach to his chest, and then he tweaked Cam's nipples. He moaned quietly with his mouth full, bobbing his head fast.

"Yes," Cam panted, losing himself in these few minutes of playful joy. Noah knew all the right buttons to hit, and he wound Cam up and kept on winding.

When Cam was about ready to burst, Noah ignored all warnings. His tongue twisted around the head of Cam's cock. He sucked his cheeks in, staring up at Cam like he was desperate for every drop.

At that sight, Cam couldn't hold back any longer.

He grabbed Noah's shoulders, gritting his teeth as his back arched and hips shuddered. Wave after blissful wave hit him, while Noah's tongue and throat worked around his shaft to swallow his passion.

Cam panted for breath as he sank onto the bed again, the world spinning around him.

"How are you still so amazing?"

"Practice makes perfect," Noah sagely advised him, grinning.

"Come here," Cam whispered, his voice a low growl. "Let me return the compliment."

Noah squeaked and tried to wrestle with him, but Cam easily flipped him onto his back and grinned down at him.

"You can't manhandle your queen like that," Noah gasped, clutching his chest dramatically.

"Can, will, and always will." Cam kissed the pout off Noah's lips, smiling at the taste of himself. He pushed one hand down Noah's tights and into his underwear, caressing the hard shaft while Noah's body went taut and quivered.

One gasp at a time, he squeezed and stroked that sensitive shaft before



finally pulling Noah's tights down so he had more room to work.

Cam loved watching Noah lose control and give in to pleasure until he couldn't even think up a smart retort.

"Please," was all Noah could whimper before long.

Cam played innocent and let go of Noah's shaft, walking his fingers up his chest. "Please what?"

Noah glared at him. "Oh, no, you don't."

Cam didn't like the idea of how much trouble he'd be in if he kept it up, so he relented and closed his fingers around Noah again, pumping his hand up and down the throbbing shaft while Noah resumed his squirming and muffled groans.

"I'm gonna—Cam, this is gonna be a mess," Noah gasped, half-sitting, but Cam didn't care. He pushed Noah flat again, kissed the protests from his lips, and drew him over the edge.

"Cam...!" Noah came undone under him, and although the sticky mess got all over his tights and black sweater, it was worth every moment. Cam loved seeing him go taut and breathless, and hearing his adorable little whimpers.

When he finally let go of Noah's softening cock, Cam wiped his hand on his tights and grinned. "I'll do the laundry," he promised.

Noah covered his face as he laughed. "I married the right guy."

"I thought that's what marriage was all about," Cam said, grinning. "Making you come so hard you can't think straight, then washing the stains off for you."

Noah rolled over onto Cam, making him gasp. Too late. At least he was naked. "No," Noah retorted, winking. "It's about sharing everything. Even the mess."

Cam laughed and playfully pushed Noah's chest, but not too hard. "You're such a jerk," he said, but the fondness in his chest overpowered any annoyance he could pretend to feel.

Noah's smile grew soft and tender, too, and he kissed Cam on the lips. "I love you, too, honey."

Cam cupped Noah's cheek and closed his eyes, letting the kiss between them linger and the seconds drag by. "I love you more," he murmured, then pulled away. "Happy Halloween, my one and only queen."

“Jingle”

Cam

“Are Kevin and Matty here yet?” Jackson leaned over Chase to ask Cam.

“Not yet.” Cam frowned, checking his watch. “Their flight should have landed like an hour ago. Should be any time now.”

The Fredericton airport was so small that people waited outside security before their flight was called. It wouldn’t take much long to get home, drop off their stuff, and join the rest of the guys for their Christmas get-together.

The poor guys got less time than ever at home, since both of them were pro hockey players. They were lucky to get four days off over Christmas.

“Good, ’cause we’ve got to get this party started!” Jackson kept glancing impatiently at the bag of gifts he’d brought everyone.

It was Christmas Eve, so the little brewery and restaurant was closing early. The guys were meeting for lunch this year. Apparently some of them wanted a romantic and relaxing evening alone with their partners.

Cam couldn’t blame them—when the twelve of them were together on these rare occasions, the hilarity and chaos was anything but relaxing.

“Give them two minutes to relax from the flight,” Chase told Jackson with a laugh.

Cam’s big brother rolled his eyes and folded those muscly forearms, strong from hours of working at the forge, over his chest. “Fine, but only two. No more.”

It was sweet to watch them together. Cam smiled as he snuck a glance their way. Jackson had never looked happier. He had expanded his business over the last few years, and he was getting steady work. He’d even rented a bigger forge uptown and he only used the backyard space for personal projects now.

Chase, meanwhile, had added several tattoos to him. He’d gotten even better at fencing, and Cam had gone to watch him in tournaments a

couple of times. He was confident and outspoken now, even outgoing. He didn't love being the center of attention—he and Jackson had insisted on a courthouse wedding, but they'd relented and hosted a reception. All the Rileys' crowd had turned up to make up for Chase's lack of family members there.

Nothing like Cam and Noah's wedding. That had been an elaborate affair at a vineyard where he had some of his hives. He still remembered the beautiful late summer flowers and the scent of honey in the air as he said *I do*. It was almost enough to make him mist up if he didn't distract himself quickly.

Cam's gaze wandered the other way, to Thomas. His little brother had married similarly, eloping with Alex when the private investigator took him to Montreal for the first time.

Thomas had really blossomed since coming out, and he seemed to be enjoying exploring gay culture like never before. It was great to be able to bond with him now. Alex's private investigation business was focused solely on jobs he felt helped people now. No more spying that made him uncomfortable.

"Coke or beer? James is buying a round," Floyd said to Greyson as he signaled the waiter to come over.

"Coke for sure," Greyson grinned. "I have to be sober for tomorrow's fun run."

"Oh, yeah!" Cam had almost forgotten about that. He leaned over the table to ask, "How long is this one?"

"Only five kilometers." Greyson waved it off. "Everyone wants to get home in time to celebrate with family."

"You two sure you want to spend it by yourselves?" Cam didn't want them feeling lonely, and since Floyd didn't have family these days, they all made sure he was included on holidays.

"I'm sure, but thanks," Greyson said with a smile. He'd relaxed and opened up to them a lot over the last few years, even telling them all how he'd used to self-harm. These days he poured most of that energy into running, and did more 5Ks and 10Ks than the rest of them could keep track of. Floyd's business was steady, which was good news for both him and Chase.

Although Floyd and Greyson weren't legally engaged, they had matching tattoos now, and that was basically the same thing. They all knew these two were in it for the long haul.

Speaking of businesses, Ryan and James were doing great. Ryan had quit working at building sites, and now the two of them sold at both Fredericton markets every week, plus half a dozen more around the province on a weekly or monthly basis.

“Toast!” Jackson called, grinning at James.

James stood up and raised his beer. “I’ll say this again when Kevin and Matty are here, but I didn’t want your drinks to run dry.”

Floyd’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “Will you get us another round then?”

“Fuck off,” James told him with a cheerful grin. “I’m not getting back in debt again.”

They all had to laugh at that. Things were tight for Ryan and James, but they got to work together without any assholes like the one who had bothered Ryan for a while.

And even if they didn’t have much to set aside, James and Ryan still stubbornly ran a transition fund to help other people living in New Brunswick pay for the healthcare or document changes that they needed. It had gotten easier a few years ago, when the province started to cover some surgeries. But there was still a need, and Cam admired the hell out of them both for working to meet it.

James and Ryan, too, were married now—they’d done it two years ago, on the spur of the moment, when the tide of true marriage equality had swept them straight to the courthouse. Ryan hadn’t wanted to wait a minute longer to marry the man he loved in his real gender, the moment James got his new birth certificate in the mail. They’d been overjoyed for him when New Brunswick had changed the law to allow him to be listed as male on all his documents without having to get surgery and sterilization that he didn’t want.

“To all of us, and to the future.”

Cam had only barely swallowed his drink before someone clapped him on the back.

“Ho, ho, *ho*! Look at these sexy young men all around me!”

It was a guy dressed as Santa, but his leggings were skintight and his shirt was unbuttoned to show a ripped chest. “A little birdy told me I’d find you all here.”

“Oh, my God.” Jackson’s eyes widened as he looked around. “Who the hell ordered the Santa stripper?”

“Hit it!” The elf standing by his side pressed a play button on a boombox sitting on his shoulder, and a sexy, slowed-down version of Santa Baby started to play as the table’s very own Santa shimmied with surprising skill.

It was hard to hear anybody ’fess up to this over the laughter and hollers from everyone at the table as their Santa walked from couple to couple, stroking chests and sitting on laps while the others cat-called.

“I bet it was Matty,” groaned Chase, covering his face as he laughed. He was the prankster of the bunch, after all.

That thought made Cam’s eyes widen as he spotted the distinctive broad frame nearby. He nearly knocked over his beer as he pointed at the elf. “Wait. That’s Kevin! You motherfucker!”

The elf nearly dropped the boombox as he raised it to cover his face, but Jackson stood up and helped yank the mask off Kevin’s head.

“Guilty,” Kevin finally admitted, laughing as Cam hugged him.

“Oh my God, that’s Matty!” Ryan swatted at the man on his lap while James pulled his beard down.

“Hey, guys!” Matty gave them a broad, gap-toothed grin as he stood up.

The hugs, cheers, and laughter that followed took a few minutes—everyone wanted their turn saying hello and telling the two of them off, but Matty was unrepentant. “You all loved it,” he told them with a smug grin.

“It was his idea,” Kevin defended, raising his hands and laughing after he put down the boombox.

The fact the two of them were dating was an open secret now. They got a lot of fan mail from hockey viewers, especially of the closeted gay variety. But because they didn’t want to make a big deal of being out, their team hadn’t, either.

They’d as good as told the rest of them that they were going to get married someday, but they both wanted to wait until after their hockey careers drew to a close.

“Sit down, sit down,” Cam urged, pulling up two more chairs so everyone could fit around their huge table. “How was your flight?”

“Ah, can’t complain. Slept the whole way,” Matty said, laughing. “I’m beat.”

“You guys are doing great, though.” Cam beamed at his friend, who was still playing for the very same team he’d once been on. “Seriously great. I’ve been watching every game, of course.”

He was glad that the two of them were together, but one of these days, they’d have to make hard choices if one of them was traded. They’d already as good as hinted that when that happened, one of them might retire to travel with the other.

“Thanks. It’s a hell of a good season.” Kevin took the beer someone handed him and raised it. “Now, I think someone started that toast without us?”

“We sure did.” James gestured at him. “The floor’s yours now.”

“It’s so great to be home.” Kevin glanced at Matty, who put his arm around him. “And to see you all again. You have so much news to tell me about!”

It was becoming a tradition now on those rare occasions, about twice a year, when they managed to get all twelve of them at the table.

One by one, the guys would stand up and share something from their life they were grateful for, something exciting or meaningful that they wanted the rest of them to know.

Then they all congratulated or sympathized. If someone needed help, they’d find a way to pitch in and make it happen—that was the unspoken law of this little family.

Cam waited until every single other guy had stood up before he took his turn.

“Last but not least,” Jackson nudged him with an elbow when everyone looked around at each other. He looked anxious, and only Cam knew why.

Cam smiled as he stood up. “I think last time, our announcement was that we were welcoming our daughters into our life.”

A series of *awws* went around the table.

“They’re with Mom and Dad now,” Cam added, smiling. Their parents were overjoyed to have granddaughters. Like they needed anyone else to spoil them rotten.

“Well, this time, I don’t have news, except to say thanks for making sure the twins had such an amazing Halloween. It only seemed fitting that I help someone else make an announcement.” He smiled, glancing around at the rest of them before he let his gaze land on Jackson.

Jackson's voice wavered. "So, uh... Chase and I shared about our house renovations, and how glad we are those are over. There's a reason we need an extra bedroom." He took Chase's hand.

Noah made a squeaking noise that nobody could miss. Then, he clapped his hands over his mouth and looked apologetic as the rest of them laughed.

The others had put it together by now.

"Oh my God. No way!" Ryan beamed.

"We're gonna be dads, too," Jackson confirmed. "We've been quietly looking into surrogacy, and arranging everything. The baby's due in July. We're really excited."

Chase's voice wobbled even more. "I never thought I'd get the chance... or even want to be a dad. But I can't wait now."

Cam swiped at his eyes as they grew a little bit wet. "The girls will love having a little cousin to boss around."

Noah was dabbing his cheeks with a tissue already as he nodded. "Congratulations, you guys."

That started the round of cheers, congratulations, and hugging, and then another round of toasts.

As they finally sat down to interrogate Jackson and Chase on baby names, Cam took a moment to look around their ragtag little group and reflect on the new generation they were adding to it.

These guys had gotten through anything and everything, offering each other listening ears, casseroles, extra hands, families for holidays, and all kinds of other support without question. As long as they had each other through the ups and downs of life, everything was okay.

Cam slipped his hand into Noah's and squeezed. Noah silently passed him a tissue while Cam grinned sheepishly and kissed his cheek.

Together, they'd all built something mighty. Something more meaningful than anything else Cam could think of: a real family.

He couldn't be prouder.



## Afterword

Dear reader,

Thank you for reading *The Riley Brothers Collection*!

Since the Riley Brothers came out (some more literally than others!), I've written 26 novels in many different worlds. Even so, I still think back often to this series which sparked so much change in my life. I poured my hopes and fears into these books, and readers found them. What more could an author wish for?

A great deal has changed in my life, in the real-life Fredericton, and in the world since these books were first published between December 2015 and July 2016. But one thing remains the same: my belief that we need feel-good stories about how we can show up for each other, choose our family, and let love save us.

If you aren't quite ready to leave this world again, the whole series is available in audio, narrated by the fabulous Michael Pauley. [Click here to check it out!](#)

Make sure you [sign up for my newsletter](#) to hear about: exclusive short stories and bonus scenes; freebies and deals; new releases in ebook, audio, and print; preorder alerts; sneak peeks at upcoming books; event appearances; and other exciting news as it happens!

I also have a reader group on Facebook if you want to chat about revisiting or discovering the Riley Brothers anew, see cute bee photos and good news stories, and keep on top of my upcoming releases with a whole bunch of lovely readers: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/edavies>

Last but not least: always be you!

~Ed

## About the Author

E. Davies grew up moving constantly, which taught him what people have in common, the ways relationships are formed, and the dangers of "miscellaneous" boxes. As a young gay author, Ed prefers to tell feel-good stories that are brimming with hope.

He writes full-time, goes on long nature walks, tries to fill his passport, drinks piña coladas on the beach, flees from cute guys, coos over fuzzy animals (especially bees), and is liable to tilt his head and click his tongue if you don't use your turn signal.



Also by E. Davies

**Hart's Bay:**

Hard Hart

Changed Hart

Wild Hart

**Significant Brothers:**

Splinter

Grasp

Slick

Trace

Clutch

Tremble

**Brooklyn Boys:**

Electric Sunshine

Live Wire

Boiling Point

**F-Word:**

Flaunt

Freak

Faux

Forever

**After:**

Afterburn

Afterglow

Aftermath

**Men of Hidden Creek:**

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